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Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book," 1931.



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A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares, and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, realising the money as a greater profit and have prospered ever since."

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RECONNOITRE KRELLIG II

This . . . is a story for a people with imagination. It is not a fantastic story; everything is within the bounds of credibility, and scientifically accurate, as we know things to-day.

It is the story of one of the exploratory voyages of 'Old Growler,' officially known as Inter-X Space Ship No. 2213/3/8.

It is sent, with a team of scientists, to Krellig II, a hitherto unexplored planet. And Krellig II, they discover, nearing it, has an unusual physical property—there is no red in the spectrum of light reflected from the planet.

Why is that remarkable? Suppose that there are inhabitants on the planet who have never known red rays upon them . . . to whom red light might be destruction? Suppose that on this planet they can turn light into solids, and they have built a city out of light?

And suppose that the explorers take red light with them . . . and red light comes suddenly from another source . . . ?

That is the theme of this imaginative projection into the far distance and the future.

by

Jon J. Deegan

RECONNOITRE KRELLIG II

by

JON J. DEEGAN

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*All characters in this story are fictitious and imaginary and bear no
relation to any living person*

CHAPTER ONE

JOURNEY THROUGH SPACE

FROM among the thousand shimmering specks dusted upon black velvet in the visor-plate, we saw planet Krellig II day by day resolving itself into a tiny, twinkling, greenish-blue disc.

Three month's flying time out beyond Vega, Inter-X Space Ship No. 2213/3/8—rechristened "Old Growler" by an irreverent crew because of a peculiar noise from her gravity retractors—seemed to crawl across an endless void like a single mote in a cathedral sunbeam, yet she was doing a steady, untiring 23,000 miles a second on her journey into depths of the galaxy.

The main atomic hydrogen engines had been shut off twenty-one days ago, when proper cruising speed registered on our instruments. Since then the ship had settled into routine quietness save for the familiar, almost imperceptible sounds that told of our existence—the soft whirr of countless relays and motors that maintained life and comparative comfort; the little creaking noises caused by occasional, unexplained stresses on the triple-skinned hull; the half-heard muttering of men engaged in work or pastime; the infrequent thud as meteoric particles, spotted by radar, bounced off the automatically-lowered electron screen.

The door to my cubicle opened and young Hartnell, the

junior physicist, strolled in. He waved a hand without smiling and draped his lanky frame across the only comfortable chair.

I was working over a large-screen microscope on the long, narrow table against a bulkhead, studying a set of hyper-cellular plant dissections that headquarters had provided from some newly-visited planetoid.

H.Q. had a habit of handing all technical people some little surprise packet of this sort before a trip, no doubt expecting tearful gratitude from recipients at the prospect of having a task to help while away the dragging weeks in outer space. However, thanks were rarely forthcoming. I suppose human nature will never change so much that men actually welcome the prospect of work. Besides, headquarters always demanded a thoroughly detailed report when the ship returned.

"Remember I told you I didn't like this trip, Pop?" asked Hartnell.

I yawned. "You mean being bored—or that?" I jerked my thumb derisively as another soft, muffled thud sounded through the vessel, like a big bag of feathers hitting a wooden floor. Outside there had been a silent, coruscating flash through inter-stellar space as our electron guard dissolved a wandering pebble into its component atoms.

The remark made him grin for a moment, showing very white teeth in a lean, tanned face. "Some day a really big baby's going to catch a ship with its pants down——"

"You mean with its Electronic Auto-Dissipator Unit, Mark VI—up!"

"Same thing, Pop," he said. "But if it happens to this crate I won't have time to know anything about it, so I don't worry." He became serious. "There's something else bothering me——"

I sent him a suspicious glance and bent over the screen again. I'd known Hartnell in such moods before. In good time he'd say what was on his mind—but not till he'd gone round and round in vain circles for a long time, baffled as a

pup that couldn't catch its own tail.

"No," he said, at last, answering some unspoken question of his own and knitting his dark eyebrows in a puzzled frown. He jumped to his feet and paced quickly up and down the cramped cubicle—about two steps forward and two sideways. "You know, I'm convinced H.Q. have kept something up their sleeves. We'll be lucky if we finish this trip without getting into a dickens of a mess—and they don't want us to know about it till we have to!"

I straightened up again. "This," I said, "is sheer atavism. You're a throwback, young Hartnell. You and your hunches ought to have lived about eighteen hundred years ago. Can I quote you the latest research results on precognition?"

"Suffering Sirius, no!"

"Anyhow, H.Q. never tell us much about these jobs, do they? Quite the contrary, in fact—they want *us* to tell *them*! After all, that's what Inter-X is for, isn't it?"

Interplanetary Exploration Bureau is, indeed, precisely what its name describes. After the astronomers and the rest of the long-range crew have done what work they can from any particular base—and we're getting nicely out into space in this year of AD 3742—a squad from the sector Inter-X boys are sent to make closer investigation of promising planets and satellites. We boast engineers, navigators, physicists, palaentologists, mathematicians, photographers, archeologists, chemists, physiologists and botanists among our crews, apart from technicians who fly the ships.

In fact, I very often think the flyers have the toughest job of the lot transporting us safely across oceans of uncharted void to some pinpoint of rock tumbling in space.

After all, you can't see a cosmic maelstrom with a telescope, and if you hit one there's no time to do much about it. Then again, the electron guard automatically turns the ship away from any meteor too big for the dissipator to deal with—which

means every time that the plotting men go frantically to work with their calculus machines to revise a course through all the baffling intricacies of three-dimensional navigation. Here the most trifling error or oversight could send an expedition wandering in space for ever or falling helplessly into the terrible, white-hot maw of some great star.

As a botanist, I often find myself worrying considerably on their behalf. All we investigators need do when a safe landing has been accomplished is put on our atmosphere suits and wander round picking up specimens.

Admittedly, there's the continual novelty of new species and occasionally a man may have to jump briskly when some strange thing grabs at his leg, but the job grows boring in time, especially when planetoids are so often bare—providing nothing except stone chips for the geologist—or produce only a few oddments of vegetation and a handful of crawling creatures.

Moreover, routine approach has to be made in accordance with Inter-X manuals and as soon as anyone finds something really interesting they whisk it away from him to the secrecy of H.Q. laboratories.

"Talking about throwbacks, Pop," said Hartnell, with what I thought deliberate insult, "how many trips have you made?"

"Long and short together—fourteen. I'm getting on a bit in years, you know," I added, with what struck me afterwards as needless apology.

"I've done six—but I've never had the jitters like this before." He gnawed savagely at his underlip. "Can't be nerves—after passing the physical check-up with nearly top marks."

I agreed solemnly that this was inescapable argument. Personally, I always experienced quivering apprehension when time came for examination prior to a trip. Everyone has to lie for three hours under some gigantic and damnable machine

at H.Q. Medical Inspection Section while the confounded thing watches the body working and photographs everything for records.

If it discovers anything worse than a broken fingernail it starts batteries of coloured lights flashing and rings half-a-dozen alarm bells.

I have to admit, though, that the experimental meal they serve for the metabolism test is always particularly tasty and satisfying.

"Atavism," I repeated, firmly. "Prehistoric instinct and hunches—myths long extinguished."

Hartnell was fidgeting with a small crystal prism—a highly-treasured trinket which he usually kept anchored to an inside fold of his uniform with a dainty beryllium chain. Value lay in the fact that it actually came from Earth, forming a tangible link with a "home" none of us had ever seen—nor was ever likely to see.

He turned the prism idly backwards and forwards, delighting in the rainbow showers of colour flashing upon white bulk-heads. "Wonder if I'll ever have a chance of getting there." I could interpret his trend of thought as clearly as if he'd spoken. Then he sighed gustily. "Sorry you think hunches are out-dated."

I gave him a grain of philosophical consolation. "Time will tell."

He grinned again, then looked at the clock and his face fell. "I've got a conference with Grubersohn at 14.30. I'll be late! See you afterwards."

My eyes followed him to the door, but immediately swung back to the clock. 14.30—Earth Solar time, invariably used during space flights. Upon every globe which so far had lent itself to colonisation, men employed this system of time measurement in addition to the rotation of hours demanded by local conditions. It formed yet another link with the planet from which we sprang.

Sometimes, in the quiet, lonely hours, I'd dip into history books and then stare reflectively for minutes on end at the blank wall, thinking how those old pioneers, having conquered the solar system, sacrificed themselves in so many ways to spread the human race across inter-stellar space.

Hartmann's fantastic expedition, for instance, when a hundred young men and women set out in one of the slow, cranky ships of their time for a planet near Alpha Centauri—the first literal flight to the stars—knowing full well that neither they nor their children would see journey's end. But their grandchildren did, although it took nearly three centuries before word of their survival could reach Mother Earth, five light years distant.

And so the human race engaged thence onward in cosmic hedge-hopping, racing into the galaxy with faster ships, taking over more and more suitable worlds, even though on more distant projects Hartmann's system had to be duplicated.

Our base—our world, if you like, and the place where I was born—follows an orbit round Zeta Sigittarii. It's a pleasant place, with trees, fields and buildings very similar to those in the pictures we have seen of Earth, twenty-eight light years away. According to all accounts, the place was originally rather bleak and inhospitable, but, as in so many other instances, our colonists adapted and modelled landscapes on Earth pattern, just as they will do on many another globe.

Once an astronomy section leader I knew let me peep into an electron telescope focussed on the home solar system, but the distance was too immense to see anything except a few dim, watery circles which he assured me were the planets lying between Venus and Uranus. He pointed out Earth, and merely by looking at that indistinct, wavering image I experienced a great and moving emotion.

My personal chance of ever standing on Mother Earth is remote. Even if space ships increased speeds to 50,000 miles a second—and they're far off that yet—the trip would last

about ninety years. I'm 122 already, with an average expectation of some fifty or sixty years more of useful life. Ninety years is a bit too much to hope for, even if they speeded up the ships and I could raise the fare.

These wistful reflections were rudely interrupted by the viewphone above my desk suddenly flickering into action. On the screen I saw Tubby Goss, one of our photographers, wearing an expression of mingled awe and incredulity.

"Come on over," he said, urgently. "We're in the spectrograph room. We've got something that'll make your eyes bulge."

"Yours'll drop right out of the screen on to my table if you aren't careful," I told him.

Six people were arguing briskly when I walked along the corridor and pushed open the door, yet I sensed a strange undercurrent of anxiety.

Hartnell grabbed me by the arm and said, "There you are, Pop. What was I telling you? Maybe you'll apologise now."

"About what?"

"My hunches, of course! Here, Jenks, you explain."

The excited chatter stilled itself when Grubersohn, the chief astronomer, whom I hadn't noticed previously, stepped forward and began icily, "I doubt if any particular individual's memory is superior to official records——"

He was a clever astronomer, no doubt, but always struck me as being unnecessarily stuffy and dignified.

"They don't bother with rumours and gossip in official records, do they?" demanded Hartnell, belligerently. "Pop's been around more than most of us and he may remember having heard something—possibly in a Z-bar or somewhere."

I threw him a reproachful glance. Z-bars are places where gay, young space-pilots hold periodic binges between trips—certainly no haunts for a respectable, middle-aged botanist.

"As this is my department," continued Grubersohn, importantly, "I feel called upon to make any statement of the situation personally."

When we were all silent, he cleared his throat, as though addressing a scientific assembly instead of one individual, and said, "In the past hour, my assistant, Jenks, has taken three separate spectrographic readings from Krellig II. I have checked his observations and concur with his preliminary findings——"

"That should clinch it," growled Hartnell, sarcastically.

"While at this point, retaining a prudent caution, I feel we have made a discovery so far without parallel in the universe! Much remains to be done, of course, both by way of explanation and investigation, and I am only sorry that we are out of radio range for communicating with headquarters. In a sentence—there is no red in the spectrum of light reflected from Krellig!"

Into the silence that followed this remarkable statement, Hartnell said angrily, "H.Q. must have known what to expect—and they never told us a word about it. I've always said they're a queer, ruthless, cunning crowd of old——"

Grubersohn held up a slender, white hand in reproach. "I cannot listen to slanders upon headquarters officials. They are our superior officers and as such should receive our respect."

"This spectrum affair's no doubt revolutionary," I said, to push him from his self-appointed pedestal, "but where do I come in? I'm only an old fellow who presses wild flowers in books and writes their names underneath."

I spoke rather bitterly, I'm afraid, because Grubersohn had once made this sneering remark about botanists in general.

"The point," said Hartnell, "is that you, being the most—er—experienced scientist aboard——"

"You mean the most ancient," I said, "but go on."

"You might have heard about similar——er——"

"Aberrations," said Jenks, having the whole spectrographic jargon on the tip of his tongue.

I shook my head. "Completely new to me, I'm afraid. Never heard anybody talk about anything like it. What's it all mean, apart from being an interesting phenomenon?"

"Ah!" Gruberson rubbed his hands. "Don't you see that a fascinating field of investigation opens before us? The light from the star Delta Kasta—to whose system Krellig belongs—is normal in every respect. Except, of course, for Fraunhofer peculiarities brought about by presence of certain elements with which we need not concern ourselves at the moment. The red disappears entirely in reflections from the planet's surface."

"I still say H.Q. knew we'd drop into something pretty sinister when they sent us on this jaunt," declared Hartnell. "They could take spectrographs back there, couldn't they? But do they tell us anything about it? No, they keep quiet and send us out—how do they phrase it?—'for purpose of observing approach of minor galactic object to Krellig II, expedition party to land at discretion upon either body for exploratory work not involving risk beyond the normal claims of duty.'" He concluded with a mocking laugh that made Grubersohn frown again.

"Does anything take the place of this missing red portion in the spectrum?" I asked Jenks.

He shook his head. "Haven't had a chance to find out. The colour range just fades off after yellow."

"No orange?"

"Nothing at all."

"Do you think it's due to actual absorptive elements on the surface?"

"Can't say. Lot of vapour and cloud swirling about."

I rubbed my chin reflectively. "It might even be caused by that."

Grubersohn said nastily, "Really, I can't see how such

amateurish queries will throw any more light on the subject."

Hartnell grinned and was about to make some comment on this unconscious punning when the astronomer closed the discussion by motioning members of his staff except Jenks to follow him outside.

Tubby Goss paused for a moment to drop another scrap of information. "If it's any use to you, Pop, the red doesn't show on photographic stuff, either." Baffled, he slowly shook his head. "Got me completely beaten. Knocks the bottom out of everything, don't it?"

Walking across to where Jenks had swung a telescopic screen into position, I looked unsuspectingly over his shoulder. Not until later was the strange, head-swimming horror which dazed me in that moment to be explained. Krellig II, which I had not seen for some days, now hung against the velvety background as a bright, greenish-blue disc—logically there seemed nothing to justify the strange, uncanny revulsion I experienced.

And peering obscenely over its rim at approximately 342 degrees of arc came the strange visitor from space whose approach we had been instructed to study. It shone like a pink, malevolent eye, now and again winking evilly.

Unsteadily, I moved away from the screen, feeling nausea clutching coldly at my vitals. I sat down in a chair and buried my moist face in my hands.

Young Hartnell came over, his lean, brown features set like granite.

"What price hunches now, Pop?" he asked softly. But his tone contained nothing mocking or humorous—and that was as it should be, for Hartnell, Tubby Goss and myself comprised the exploration party detailed to set first foot upon this hateful planet.

CHAPTER TWO

KRELLIG IS INHABITED

NATURALLY, we adopted all routine precautions before leaving the ship. Air composition, temperature, radiation and gravity tests made through the investigation lock showed nothing our atmosphere suits couldn't handle—yet at the back of all our minds lurked an unspeakable doubt born of the horrible greenish-blue light that bathed the planet.

At intervals throughout the day before we landed, the three of us glued an eye to one of Grubersohn's telescopes only to find observations completely nullified by those layers of swirling vapour.

"There must be a break somewhere, surely," I said. "If we're to dive down there, I'd like to know what we're diving into."

Tubby Goss persuaded the duty pilot—much against the flyer's will, incidentally—to traverse Krellig in an orbit of about ten thousand miles, insisting it was necessary for photographic records.

"Maybe you'd like a spell of hedge-hopping," suggested the pilot, with heavy sarcasm. "These crates are absolutely built for it—much better than any old-fashioned vertical-lift jobs."

The trouble is that controls-men are educated into an utter horror of gravity, with the result that they always expect it to reach out from a planet and grab them by the neck, whereas

with reasonable care and judicious use of modern appliances it is possible to orbit safely at surprisingly-close ranges.

Nevertheless, we caught no glimpse of the planet's surface. Radar showed a few dim mountain outlines, but at that distance instruments were incapable of providing any indication about the fog layer's depths.

"A very pleasant afternoon walk in store for us if this stuff goes right down to the floor," said Hartnell, grinning. "Like groping through a barrel of green molasses."

Six of us helped the pilot watch his indicators as "Old Growler"—magnificently living up to her nickname—roared to a landing on some bare, level plateau located by means of an electronic screen. The swirling vapours proved about six miles thick, hanging permanently some ten to fifteen thousand feet above the ground, so that everywhere was bathed in the same dim, greenish-blue radiance we had seen from the other side.

At least, there was rock—the good, solid silicon our space travels had proved so truly universal. We first knew that when the ship's armoured under-hull came to rest with a gentle scraping sensation. And when we stared so eagerly from the visi-ports, searching a new planet with avid eyes, there was more dull rock to be seen—rock, rock and nothing but rock under that strange sky.

"Ever looked around at the bottom of the sea, Pop?" asked Hartnell. "Doesn't this remind you of it?"

I nodded. "Ever seen anybody's face under one of those old-type sodium lamps? Orange-grey cheeks and purple lips?"

He turned and started violently, before realising that his own features appeared as sickeningly-coloured as mine. Then he grinned again. "Any inhabitants we meet on Krellig are due for a shock, eh?" The smile faded and I thought he shuddered slightly.

"That's right," I said, following his thoughts. "If active

life exists out there——," I gestured towards green-blue wastes beyond the port, "the shock's likely to be coming our way. I won't retract a single word I've said about the futility of 'hunches,' as you call them, yet we all seem to sense some evil intelligence about this planet. One person might make a mistake, but when it's as unanimous as this—well, I just don't know."

"Although he won't admit it, Pop, I think even old Grubersohn isn't happy." Hartnell's voice sank to an earnest whisper. "What's your guess? What awful sort of things do you reckon we'll come across out there?"

Experience on five inhabited planets has taught me never to judge by appearances. Those warm, furry, attractive people of Alvaston Major, for instance, who greeted us like long-lost brothers and then, on the third night of our visit, tried to kill us all in the most ghastly manner with secret doses of proton-minus sulphur. On the other hand, I could point to the Worm Men of Athos—revolting and terrifying creatures at first glance, but with whom we have since established a close and amicable relationship which has inestimably benefited our respective worlds.

"Judging by all that rock," I said, "there won't be much in my line." I turned to one of the analysts. "How's the humidity?"

"Point zero-one-three-eight."

Plant-life, then, was possible. Conditions appeared, in fact, suitable for something more interesting than varieties of lichen. Truth to tell, after the last couple of trips I was becoming more than a little bored with lichens and fungi.

Grubersohn came bustling along with his particular budget of specialised information for the investigation party. "The asteroid," he announced, importantly, "is approaching with moderate speed from a position on the other side of Krellig II. It will reach conjunction in thirty hours, fourteen minutes. Its diameter is slightly in excess of fourteen hundred miles

and the rim should therefore appear in a position of 176 degrees at 04.39 hours Krellig time or 23.02 hours Earth time——”

I was too busy struggling into my atmosphere suit to bother with a lot of technical data about trajectories and angles of incidence. As quickly as possible, I adjusted the various gadgets, grabbed my portable laboratory and said, “Let’s go.” It seemed as though the suspense was making us all just a little morbid.

The volume containing official regulations and procedure for “External Exploration (Home Galaxy) Parties, Grade III,” is so weighty and comprehensive that even limited extracts are apt to prove boring to those fortunate people not compelled by duty to read them. Suffice it to say that matters boil down to Method—with a capital “M.”

Notes and observations must be taken by each specialist with the expedition in such a way that on return to the ship he is able to complete a highly-complex form that automatically sucks him dry of information. This form is later despatched to headquarters and put to unknown uses.

It makes investigation simple—and rather dull.

Tubby Goss and myself hung back to allow young Hartnell the doubtful honour of being the first man to tread Krellig’s inhospitable surface. We saw him step gingerly off the ladder lowered from the space-lock in “Old Growler’s” nose and test the rock with his foot, as though uncertain whether it would bear his weight. He turned towards us, looked upwards and made a gesture of triumph with his arms.

After a pause for Tubby to make routine photographs we set off slowly across the plateau, our eyes and instruments focussed upon the ground.

Inter-com from the ship sounded inside my helmet. “Have you anything to report? How do your observations compare with readings taken in the air-lock?”

“Hello,” I said, somewhat bitterly, for the benefit of

Hartnell and Tabby. "They've soon started worrying. Who's going to answer them?"

My colleagues' simultaneous reply was to the effect that age must have lent me additional wisdom and profanity; moreover, a botanist had little to do at the moment because of entire lack of herbage. They therefore unanimously elected me as spokesman to base.

Seeing that argument would be useless, I switched over my transmitter and reeled off a string of figures from our portable meters, but this did not keep the recorders busy for long.

"In what direction do you propose to proceed?"

Hartnell gestured towards a line of hills to be seen vaguely in the greenish-blue twilight about a couple of miles away, at the same time raising eyebrows inquiringly behind the transparent facepiece of his helmet. Admittedly, the place seemed as good as any to make a start, though I groaned inwardly at the prospect of tabulating more species of fungi—probably lichens, too. I reported our intentions to base.

"Permission granted," announced the ship controller, graciously. "Communicate every two hours."

Having prudently kept his outside microphone switched off, Hartnell growled some disrespectful remark about folks who ought to be getting busy instead of lounging at comfortable desks while others endured hard work and discomfort in sweaty atmosphere suits.

This, of course, was exaggeration in more ways than one. All space suits are apt to be tiresome after twelve hours or so, but our new Mark VII types are a great advance on all previous construction. They are well ventilated; field of vision is both clear and spacious, with filters dropping automatically in place to cut off dangerous glare, ultra-violet or cosmic radiation; and—best of all—the gravity-adjustment motor doesn't cut into the shoulder-blades so painfully as on the Mark III and Mark V patterns.

Not that Krellig gave us a great deal of trouble in these

respects. Gravity was about decimal-eight-seven (compared with Earth standards) which meant that the adjuster didn't try to tear itself out of the suit—in either an upwards or a downwards direction—because of heavy loading.

"A good thing, too," said Tubby, with feeling, when I remarked on this. "Remember the last trip to Kappa—how my suit collapsed and I had to run nearly a couple of miles back to the ship through a bromine mist with only an emergency mask?"

"Anyway, there's nothing poisonous in Krellig air," said Hartnell, grinning. "Just about one per cent of the oxygen a man needs to keep going."

"Very reassuring—I don't think!" sniffed Tubby.

As we moved fairly rapidly across the open rocks, I snapped down my helmet's telescopic visor-plate. Hampered by the poor, uncanny light, I could nevertheless distinguish several dark, irregular patches upon the cliff-faces we approached.

"Look," I told Hartnell. "What do you think they are?"

"Yes, I see them, Pop. Caves, maybe?"

I halted abruptly. Caves? We snapped up the telescopic plates to gaze at one another more clearly, reading the expression of surprise mingled with vague disquiet upon each other's features.

Tubby took advantage of the pause to make exposures on rock strata where a fissure about six inches deep and a foot wide showed itself in the ground.

"Caves?" I said again, reflectively. It might mean anything—yet our minds were occupied with the inescapable fact that in every system so far explored the existence of caves coincided with the presence of more or less intelligent life. Admittedly, that life had sometimes long since vanished from the face of a planet—or it had abandoned such primitive dwellings to build artificial homes with claws, fingers and tentacles as the case might be. Yet it was undeniable how life and shelter from the elements were invariably associated with

creatures in a moderately advanced stage of evolution—usually creatures ready to defend their lairs from the stranger.

These reflections were interrupted by a cry of astonishment from Tubby. I turned quickly towards him, because our sturdily-built photographer was not easily surprised.

"Look!" he said. "These rocks—the surface has been fused at some time or other."

"Probably volcanic overflow," I suggested.

"It can't be that. There's natural stone a centimetre or so underneath."

Tubby had made no mistake. Easily visible across the strata of the small fissure was an overlay of dark, lava-like substance, fused into the surface stone.

"Blazing Betelguese!" cried Hartnell, who had been prodding round with a geological pick. "It's the same all round here."

We arrived almost simultaneously at the same conclusion—our deductions supported by quick tests which showed the fused material to belong definitely to rock lying immediately beneath and by the fact that even odd boulders bore the same strange, half-inch coating. No flood of lava would produce such an effect. The most likely explanation was a burst of terrific heat in the atmosphere immediately above—probably a variety of nuclear fission.

Hartnell got excited. "I knew it! At last—intelligent life! Maybe some sort we've never even heard of before! You'll have something good to tell H.Q. about, Pop, eh?" I saw his face become suddenly serious. "I wonder," he said, more slowly, "if that's what my hunch was about? Suppose we meet——" He shrugged away his anxiety. "No, no, of course not. We'd have seen 'em——"

"Perhaps," said Tubby, quietly, "they've seen us."

Morale didn't seem to be running high, although expeditions like these are admittedly tough on the nerves. "When I call the ship I'll suggest they send out a drilling team. We

can't do anything useful here. Let's be moving."

Walking in silence, we eventually reached the foot of the cliff. Hartnell had been correct in his half-guess, half-observation concerning dark shadows against the hillside. They were entrances—varying from six feet to eight feet square—to hollows of unknown proportions inside the rock.

We had seen no sign of life, either vegetable or animal, in that eerie, barren desert. Nothing existed save a dreadful, oppressive quietness, broken only by our feet padding on the hard ground, leaving behind a faint trail of abnormally fine dust that hung in the still air as though reluctant to fall after remaining for so long undisturbed.

I turned the gravity-adjuster another couple of notches to help myself up the almost sheer wall. Entrances to the caves lay along a ledge about ten feet wide, and as far as I could judge there was no means of reaching the spot except from below. We searched the ground carefully—and in vain—for tracks of any creature that might have made its home in the vicinity. Whatever we might come upon, there was one comfort—the caves were a natural formation.

"I'd better report to the ship," I said, "or they'll be getting peevisish. We've been away almost a couple of hours."

The controller received my report noncommittally—they usually do—but I sensed an undercurrent of interest.

"We propose now," I concluded, "to investigate the first cave to the eastwards."

"Permission granted. Exercise every caution."

I switched off.

"Every caution," quoted Tubby, bitterly. "That leaves us holding the can. Wonder what they'd say if we told 'em we didn't think it safe to go in?"

"Let's tell them next time," suggested Hartnell. "That'll pass the can back to them."

"Well," I said, with a sigh. "Come on and see what's there."

Grumbling about headquarters' funny little ways is every spaceman's privilege. It not only provides a harmless means of blowing off steam, but when comparative youngsters like Hartnell and Goss begin to express cynical reactions it shows they are emerging from the apprenticeship stage. Enthusiasm still exists beneath the surface—but tempered with prudence, which is an excellent thing.

Wandering about strange planets is no job for exuberant youths who laugh lightly in the face of danger and plunge headlong to their own destruction—very often taking their colleagues with them.

The cave entrance we had selected was about seven feet high and five feet wide. Inside was utter blackness. Hartnell shone his beryllium torch along the shaft, cutting a brilliant, white swathe from the darkness, and we stood for a moment to allow the automatic vision-reactors to find their level.

In accordance with rules we had adjusted our eyepieces to conform with Krellig's dim, greenish-blue light, and unthinking vision-reactors promptly snapped protective filters into position against the beryllium glare, so that we were able to see with precisely the same lack of clarity as outside.

This, of course, was fairly poor, but on the other hand it demonstrated H.Q.'s wisdom, for the dazzling light, coming after two hours in semi-darkness, might have caused unbearable pain.

The cave was empty and bare as far back as we could see, even when we re-adjusted visor-plates to normal clearness.

Hartnell tapped a piece of rock from near the entrance, only to find that same half-inch of fused overlay. Yet specimens farther along disclosed a remarkable lessening of the affected thickness, until some eleven feet from the opening it ceased entirely.

Tubby said thankfully, "Glad I wasn't standing outside when whatever it was went off."

I nodded. "You'd need to be a fair way along the cave,

too. The blast might not have been hot enough to fuse rock back there, but it would probably have burned any animal to a crisp."

"Let's get on——" began Hartnell, then stopped. "Look here, you don't think that—that confounded asteroid has anything to do with it?"

I heard Tubby catch his breath.

"Suppose the thing moves in an elliptical orbit—like a comet—and swings near Krellig every few years or maybe every century? And couldn't its red colour be due to heat rays?"

"In twenty-eight hours we'll know," I told him, grimly. "Let's press on."

The cave became rapidly narrower and lower, until in a hundred yards or so it had developed into a kind of tunnel, forcing us to hunch our shoulders inside the atmosphere suits as we moved cautiously in single file, myself ahead and Goss bringing up the rear. I held a speed-gamma pistol at the ready and with the other hand shone the torch along our path.

A speed-gamma is a handy and comforting weapon, although messy to use. Chief virtue is an immense penetrative power through any variety of matter by virtue of the fact that it works with gamma radiations from the almost prehistoric X-rays. Even in the twentieth century they knew that these intensely short-wave emanations eventually destroyed all kinds of organic products. Later and more understanding science compressed this slow, remorseless effect within a period of less than half a second. Death from the modern ray cone is instantaneous at three hundred yards; the drawback—especially with creatures in the monster category—is that half a second later the victim has become a horrible, stinking heap of corruption.

We must have progressed for six hundred yards before Krellig presented us with its first sign of life. Halfway down the tunnel wall a clump of thin, wavy tubes—not more than

two inches long and almost sufficient in number to cover the palm of a hand—shone palely in the beryllium beam.

"Fungi," I said, with no special delight. "Wherever you go, you can't escape them. Scrape 'em off into a specimen box, young Hartnell. I'm cluttered up with this torch and pistol."

When he had done so, I suggested that we had come far enough for a preliminary trip.

"At least," I said, "they can't accuse us of returning empty-handed and this tunnel looks as though it might go on for ever."

We must have been within fifty yards of the cliff face when Tubby, who was now leading, switched off the torch and halted abruptly. From ahead we saw once more the familiar greenish-blue glow reflected from layers of cloud. "I saw something!" said Tubby. "Something moved."

Subconsciously, I noted with approval that even in such a moment of tension he spoke normally. The natural reaction, of course, is to whisper—and the habit takes a lot of breaking. Atmosphere suits, being airtight, are naturally also sound-proof, so that the voice can't be heard outside.

"You two stop here," went on Tubby Goss. "I'll see if it was only an optical illusion."

Little more than one long, wondering minute later he returned. His news was not exactly a surprise, for we had heard his involuntary exclamation and his excited heavy breathing.

"I was right! They saw us first! There's a dozen of 'em squatting round the mouth of the cave—waiting for us to come out!"

CHAPTER THREE

THE CITY OF LIGHT

YOU will remember previous references to the official interplanetary exploration manual—a volume which has been compiled with the idea of laying down rules and regulations for almost every contingency the spaceman is likely to encounter. The several chapters dealing with methods of approach to intelligent animal life provide lengthy and fascinating reading—better in theory than in practice on occasions.

Think for a moment how simple it used to be—in the days before we had a universal human language—for men to convey meanings to one another by signs. Yet how could you show a Kolonite you were hungry or tired when that peculiar race out beyond Alpha Proxima neither eat nor sleep?

The problem arises from evolution on Earth. Practically all forms of life there have been built up with a head, two eyes, two legs, two arms (or wings) and a body of sorts. But suppose life on other planets—as, indeed, turned out to be the case—arranged itself on quite a different system? Where and how would one begin to establish communication?

We've gone far since that elementary question, of course, and as a result we now have regulations for "Communications With Intelligent Beings (Extra-Terrestrial) Parts I, II and III." Many of these instructions are ponderous and com-

plicated, but let me quote a brief, important passage:

No previously unknown extra-terrestrial creature shall be deemed hostile until such hostility is established beyond all possible doubt. Seizure and detention of expedition personnel is not necessarily an act of hostility within the meaning of this regulation, for no harm may be intended.

No gesture, sound or appearance shall be deemed hostile unless proved by experience to be threatening.

Nor shall any action by unknown extra-terrestrial creatures leading to the deaths of not more than two expedition personnel be counted hostile, since such action may well be occasioned by accident or ignorance. At the same time, all exploration personnel shall take measures for personal safety at their discretion, within the limits of these regulations.

In other words, headquarters would prefer to lose a few spacemen to a planet's inhabitants rather than have a war on their hands—and if there was a war they'd like a survivor or two from the original party (that's where the self-defence clause comes in) to carry the can.

So with one thing and another on our minds, Hartnell and I moved slowly to the cave mouth to meet our first creatures of Krellig. We were sweating a bit and breathing hard.

"What are they like?" I asked Tubby.

"Not too bad to look at—a tortoise species, I imagine. I'm worrying more about what they're thinking—if they can think, that is."

The creatures did not move as we emerged side by side from the cave and stood a few feet distant regarding them cautiously. I heard faint clicks and whirring sounds from the busy cameras fitted into Tubby's suit.

There were twelve of them—hiding beneath thick, horny carapaces fully three feet high and equally as great in diameter, roughly ellipsoid in shape.

"They don't seem as though they're alive," whispered Hartnell.

"Oh, yes," said Tubby. "They're alive all right! Though I wondered myself at first."

"They're watching us," he said. "Those short, stubby antennæ near the front rim of the shells—see how they're throbbing?"

Within that semi-circle of what might have been large boulders, both parties faced each other cautiously. (Making the first move is tricky, and the manual suggests it should always be left to the others.)

Tension began to mount and we felt ourselves sweating more copiously. Were they playing some cat-and-mouse game with us—or were they stupid and harmless? Somehow I couldn't resist a mounting feeling of apprehension and horror, born no doubt of that approaching unholy planet, the very sight of which on the telescopic screen had caused a mysterious nausea to rise cold and sickly in my throat.

"For sweet Alpha's sake, somebody do something!" gasped young Hartnell at last.

"I'll unhitch the Mattus transferer," I said, "though whether I'll be able to operate it is another matter."

"Take it easy," counselled Tubby. "Cautious and slow, remember."

His advice was superfluous. If I could help it I intended to do nothing whatever to alarm those sinister, motionless lumps laying around us in the green twilight.

The Mattus transferer, named after its inventor, is an apparatus visualised for centuries, yet completed only in the last 50 years. Much remains to be done by way of perfecting this electrical aid to telepathy—in fact the gadget was nearly jettisoned after that trouble on Zonnash, when both parties accidentally received totally wrong impressions of each other's ideas and opened big-scale hostilities—but how early expeditions progressed without such an instrument is more

than I can imagine.

However, don't get the idea that a transferer gives perfectly understandable translations of unspoken thoughts. The most that portable models achieve is an exchange of simple desires and, sometimes, narrative stories. With a laboratory full of the latest equipment specialists can often mentally discuss elaborate formulæ and mathematical theories.

But that, like every other aspect of exploration, comes later. The men in the field, such as ourselves, merely prod the surface to find promising spots for the more thorough excavators.

Trying to control a trembling hand, I shifted the small, square box to the front of my belt with a motion that I hoped was not too fast to be alarming or too slow to be suspicious. The tortoise shapes remained unmoved, except for stumpy antennæ pulsating evenly.

Then I pulled out the extending receiver-rod.

"Steady!" urged Tubby.

This was another crucial moment, for the long, bright tube might easily be thought a weapon, but it passed without response.

"Now we're almost set for action," announced Hartnell, in a relieved tone. "Come, my pretty ones—come and be psychoanalysed by Poppa!"

Despite the tension, I grinned. The remark was just the sort of tonic we needed.

"The receiver-rod," states the Mattus instruction manual, "should be placed in close proximity to the subject's brain case. If this is not easily distinguishable, optical and aural orifices usually provide a reasonable guide."

I looked again at the "tortoises" and felt rather helpless. As far as I could see, they had neither eyes nor ears.

Hartnell guessed my problem. "Near the antennæ," he suggested. "Try that big one—fifth from the left."

I nodded and gingerly extended the rod. My subject was

a creature with a shell slightly more steeply curved than the others but certainly no greater in circumference.

The thing remained steadfast.

"More courage than I'd have, anyhow," muttered Tubby. "I wouldn't let 'em poke anything near my face."

"Maybe it's not intelligent after all," said Hartnell. "Or perhaps it'll take a bite out of the rod any moment," he added, hopefully.

"Keep quiet for a few minutes," I said. "Give me a chance to see if I can tune in."

Pressing the button which caused a flexible molybdenum contact to hold itself against my forehead, I obeyed the Mattus handbook instruction for "concentrating with full power of intellect, to the exclusion of all other thoughts, upon your expedition's peaceful intentions and the desire for cordial relationships with the subject."

To my astonishment—for somehow I never expect gadgets like the Mattus device to bring results without a great deal of trouble, if at all—there was almost immediate response. Not in words or actions, of course, but I received straight-away a mental impression of indescribable fear and distrust, mingled with a resolute intention to defend to the death one of the few rights remaining to a race that had once known full mastery over Krellig.

I forced my mind to emphasise greeting and friendship, whereupon, amid a warm, wonderful glow of satisfaction, I perceived the fear and defiance fade, giving place to a curiosity which increased in intensity suddenly, as though other intellects added their quota of thought-products.

Young Hartnell's guess had obviously been correct—the creature with the unusually humped carapace was leader of this group which had been subjecting us to a weird, eyeless scrutiny, and he had in some way communicated my reassuring thoughts to the others, whereupon they in turn had become

inquisitive about their visitors.

As we proceeded to exchange thought-images, I breathed a sigh of relief that the personality revealing itself betrayed no aggressive tendencies—only a polite, dignified note of inquiry. For my part, I was puzzled that creatures of such undoubted brain-power, who had so quickly perceived the purpose of our Mattus machine, should apparently possess no visible civilisation. I had confirmed that they did, indeed, live deep in the rocky caves, feeding upon the fungus, a scrap of which we had discovered growing on the wall.

In half an hour we had laid foundations for an amicable association. It must have been a boring time for Hartnell and Tubby; they could do nothing save watch the varying expressions flitting across my features. The "tortoises" remained motionless—and, of course, expressionless. Then I took time out to tell the others what I'd learned.

We sat on the stony ledge and I said, "I'm afraid it's another of those war stories——"

"Oh," said Hartnell, softly. "Then the fused rock out there was due to nuclear fission after all—or something similar?"

I nodded. "As far as I can gather, these are a race that call themselves Shakkies. The one I've been talking to—if we can use the phrase for the sake of simplicity—is one of their brighter lads, named Aiku Haro. For centuries they've lived in these caves, multiplying from the few survivors who escaped global heat-ray battles. They've no material, no tools, no writing—nothing except theoretical knowledge handed down by word of mouth——"

"Eh?" Goss jumped. "You mean they actually speak?"

"Oh, yes. Aiku says they breathe through gill-organs under the shell. They also use these gills to make squeaking sounds far outside our ear-range—about 80,000 or 90,000 cycles."

"Are these Shakkies, as they call themselves, the only live things on Krellig?"

I paused and licked my lips furtively, for I dreaded what I had to tell them next. "The heat blasts destroyed everything except the fungus, the Shakkies—and the Holons."

"What in Bootes are Holons?" demanded Hartnell.

"They're Shakkies who broke away from the survivors about two hundred years ago, when the population began to increase again. Apparently they weren't satisfied here and started out on their own to explore. Now they kill Shakkies at sight, as a matter of principle. According to Aiku they're a nasty unprincipled crowd—and they live in a city about six miles away."

"A city?" Tubby's face lit up with excitement, thinking enthusiastically of photographic records. "You mean a real city—built above ground—not a collection of catacombs?"

Young Hartnell was puzzled. "How do the Holons come by a city—when the other crowd live like troglodytes?"

Imagine the position, I said, if the human race were almost wiped out and the survivors were left with nothing save bare expanses of fused rock with which to build a new civilisation. Was progress likely to be made until a lapse of thousands of years? What did it matter if someone knew how to build a radio set—when there was no metal to be had? What use to be a skilled analytical chemist if no test-tube could be manufactured?

But during their wanderings the Holons stumbled upon a relic from the old, high civilisation—a variety of installation which they had somehow managed to repair and with the help of which they had built a city named Kor.

Hartnell threw a suspicious glance at the twelve motionless humps around us. "No wonder they don't like the Holons in that case. Sheer jealousy, of course."

"Come on," said Tubby, in a businesslike voice. "Make

your tortoise friend show us the way."

As I expected, Aiku proved stubborn. Emanations of fear through the Mattus machine became nearly as strong as when I had first switched on. The very thought of Holons seemed to generate inexpressible horror.

By the time he had been persuaded to take us within viewing distance of Kor—nothing would induce him to travel farther, and I read his intention of scuttling back to the safety of his caves the very instant the city came into sight—it was time to make a routine report to the ship, whose outline was faintly perceptible against the skyline on the other side of the rocky plain.

And as I gazed with affection upon "Old Growler," I wondered with a vague sense of surprise why the Shakkies had not plunged deep into their tunnels upon her approach. Did it, perhaps, mean they were more courageous than I had gathered from Aiku? Or was it that they knew a race sufficiently advanced to travel by space ship would never inflict wanton harm upon them?

The controller's voice sounded as impersonal as ever. "Permission to proceed is granted. The fullest observations and records must be taken. It is not proposed to send a further expedition from the ship until later. In case of emergency, switch on automatic distress signallers."

"Grieving galaxies!" said Tubby, after I had switched off. "Why the devil not? Look here, do you really think they're expecting something to happen when that damned asteroid pokes its nose over the horizon?"

I shrugged helplessly. "What I'm more interested in at the moment is how our friends the Shakkies travel. Do they crawl like snails or just roll over and over? In either case, we'll be a long time covering the six miles to Kor."

None of us was prepared for what occurred when Aiku reluctantly announced his intention to begin the journey. He

and three others suddenly rose to a height of fully eight feet, balancing themselves on a central cluster of ten blue tentacles and moving as quickly, smoothly and lightly as a ballet-dancer on tip-toes. We could see on the underside of their shells a soft, pale, unprotected flesh, ribbed with rows of gills through which they breathed Krellig's thin atmosphere.

"They look like those pictures of mushrooms from Earth," exclaimed young Hartnell, in a low voice.

"Some time—I don't know when—I'll get away from fungi," I said, wearily. "Come on. It looks as though we'll have to travel quickly, after all."

Aiku led us swiftly along the ledge, through rough defiles and over precipitous cliffs. On occasions we were unable to tackle sheer rock faces up which the Shakkies romped by seemingly squatting on their tentacles and using them as a starfish does its legs—some hauling the humped, shell-covered bodies forwards, others pushing from behind. A way round had to be discovered for us, greatly to our humiliation.

Dark rock lay everywhere under the greenish sky. In all my travels across quite a number of planets, I had never seen so desolate and forbidding a region.

Panting with exertion, we commenced to climb the last rugged slope. Beyond that, Aiku told me on one of the occasions when I extended the Mattus receiver-rod towards him, lay a plain on which the dreadful city stood. None of the Shakkies appeared particularly distressed by our strenuous trip and I wondered whether they were much lighter than their considerable bulk suggested or whether their gill-mechanisms were more efficient oxygen-extractors than our own lungs.

Beneath the brow of the ridge, the Shakkies sank once more into the same boulder-like mounds that had greeted us when we emerged from their cave, refusing to approach nearer.

Wonderingly, we hauled our sweating bodies the last few yards before cautiously dropping full length on the shiny stone. Then I raised my head and looked down upon a plain

similar to that we had traversed after leaving the space ship.

In the centre of this expanse rested Kor, City of Light. At least, that was the best description obtainable from Aiku's tremulous, frightened thought-impulses. "City of Light"—I could have sworn the translation had been accurate.

But when I gazed upon Kor, its towering buildings stretching fully five miles to right and left and as far in front as the eye could see under that dreadful, green radiance, I knew it for a spectacle the like of which I had never seen before. Nor, in my terror, did I ever wish to see it again.

CHAPTER FOUR

WE MEET THE HOLONS

WHAT would any reasonable person anticipate after being promised a glimpse at a "city of light?" Towers of crystal, no doubt, sparkling with rainbow-colour from every facet and the whole bathed in a warm, scintillating glow?

By its very contrast from the splendour we had imagined, our first sight of Kor left our hearts sick with disappointment and dread.

For no light or movement stirred in those gigantic buildings bulked against the dull-green sky, and the fabric of them was dead, unholy black—not the hard, bright blackness of jet but an utterly complete absence of illumination and reflection which lent the silhouette a one-dimensional quality.

As Hartnell said afterwards, it was "like a pattern clipped from the floor of an Antares dungeon." There seemed no more light in Kor than there was air in inter-stellar space.

The Mattus machine must positively have oozed question marks as we fell back gasping and I pushed the receiver-rod towards Aiku once more. I sensed how his mind had perceived our horrified dismay—sometimes the two-way effect of the Mattus is a mixed blessing—but obviously he attributed it to the wrong cause and thought that we, also, were afraid of the Holons.

"Light?" I queried. "City of Light?"

His antennæ pulsed more vigorously, as though by our standards he had nodded his head in confirmation.

"Light," he said. "Kor, City of Light."

And as we lay there in hollows of the glassy, nightmare rocks, Aiku told me more about his strange, ruthless compatriots and the use they had made of their accidental legacy from the old civilisation.

From time to time during the silent half-hour of our thought-conversation I heard Hartnell and Tubby stir, but the Shakkies possessed that inexhaustible patience so marked among certain of our own species whose ancestors are superstitiously supposed to have sprung from countries lying between certain longitudes of Earth.

This sustained practice brought my mind much closer to Aiku's, so that towards the end our idea-pictures became much clearer and were exchanged more rapidly. I may say, too, that the questions were very one-sided. The Shakkies' leader, while readily revealing all he knew concerning Krellig, showed little curiosity about ourselves. And looming over everything all the time was his obsessional fear of the Holons.

"Phew!" I "signed off" with Aiku and relaxed, half-exhausted by prolonged concentration, against the stone shelf. Some of my limpness was no doubt due to the fantastic explanation I had heard.

"What in Ursa Major have you been chattering about?" demanded young Hartnell. "Galloping Gemini! You've had time to hear the history of Krellig from the time the first of these weird tortoises was hatched out."

"That's right," agreed Tubby. "Come on, Pop. What yarn's he been spinning you?"

"I'm only a botanist—a minor servant of headquarters who collects wild flowers and——"

"Yes, yes, we've had all that before." Goss gestured with impatience. "I know Grubersohn offended your dignity, but

nobody except you takes any notice of stuffy astronomers. Come on—what did that barnacle say?"

I sighed at the impetuosity of youth. "This is more your line of territory than mine, young Hartnell. I know a bit about botany—I'm far from being an expert in physics. All I can tell you is Aiku's version. He says Kor really is a City of Light——"

Hartnell bit his lip, baffled. "Give me the Mattus rod. You can't have got it straight——"

"No, wait! You're the one who's confused. Let me express it more clearly—Kor is a city *built* of light."

There was a second's stunned silence.

"Built of light?" echoed Hartnell, incredulously.

"You mean a sort of dark mirage?" suggested Tubby. He heaved himself to the ridge once more and stared out across the dim plain, as though testing this theory at first-hand.

"It's still there, isn't it?" I said. "Kor's no illusion. It's solid and real enough in a material sense. That's precisely what it's made of, in fact—light-material."

"Impossible!"

I urged him to tear his mind from contemplation of Krellig's present primitive inhabitants—to thrust it back through the centuries to a time when there existed a civilisation sufficiently scientific to devise instruments capable of reducing the planet's entire surface to a molten waste. "In some ways," I said, "they probably knew more than the human race does now. If these thick layers of vapour hadn't prevented them learning that other worlds exist we might still have been on Earth—receiving a visit from them!"

"But—light!" exclaimed Tubby, gnawing on the problem. "After all, light's my business in a way. I've known careless operators get their photographs almost solid by over-exposure, though I wouldn't guarantee to build a house with the result."

"Aiku seems to understand the theory all right," I told them. "Whether it will stand up to examination is something in your department, young Hartnell. He says light consists basically of stream of vibrations emanating from a particular source. It has velocity—therefore it has mass."

"Kindergarten Physics, Lesson One," murmured Hartnell, but the comment was almost entirely automatic. His young, agile brain was busy probing, testing, speculating. "They proved that as far back as the twentieth century. In the Scientific Antiquities Museum at headquarters there's a quaint little gadget inside a glass vacuum tube. Four vanes—polished on one side and black on the other—turn a spindle when the thing's placed in a bright light. The shiny surfaces reflect and the reverse sides absorb, thereby transforming light-pressure into mechanical movement."

"I remember the Altair Power Project," said Tubby. "Some bright boy at H.Q. got the idea of swinging a light-and-heat power plant round Altair as an artificial satellite and transmitting the juice by radio wherever it was needed." He shook his head sadly. "It didn't work, though."

"What Pop and his pal Aiku mean," went on Hartnell, "is that the light stream is composed of matter—atoms, electrons or whatever you like to call them—and for that reason it should be possible theoretically to collect these particles until they accumulate sufficiently to form a visible solid."

"Don't drag me into it," I said. "That's what he told me," I jerked a hand towards the ridge, "and there's Kor."

No one could deny that normally objects reflected some wavelengths of light and absorbed others. Why, for instance, did an object appear yellow to our eyes? Because, with white light being composed of yellow, red and blue, some quality in the object's surface absorbed the two last-mentioned hues but reflected the yellow. Such an inescapable physical fact meant, in turn, that all objects upon which light fell must acquire

additional particles of matter.

When I mentioned the idea to Hartnell, I found he had become almost reconciled to a theory that his mind previously rejected automatically by reason of its very fantasy. Possibly the solid, indisputable presence of the city of Kor had something to do with this change of front.

"Look at it this way," he said. "Can we tell whether a mountain, exposed for thousands of years to the effects of light, has gained any appreciable mass? Not by any method I know, yet it's quite conceivable that a couple of hundred square miles of rock has gathered quite a lot. Now suppose the old tortoises discovered some way of concentrating and speeding up this accumulation of material? If it's strong enough for buildings the size of those back there, I can imagine a dozen important uses."

Resolutely, he rose to his feet. "Come on, Pop. Call old Aiku and let's move on. Holons or no Holons, a light-building machine is something I must see!"

When I communicated our project to Aiku I received in reply via the Mattus machine a sensation of deep, crawling terror so great that I involuntarily shuddered and switched off. Obviously, we could expect no help from the Shakkies, all four of whom now wriggled their stubby antennæ and shook a couple of tentacles in alarm.

"The Holons will kill you," declared Aiku, firmly. "They are cruel, suspicious animals. The weapons with which you promise to protect us will be taken away and used upon ourselves. To visit Kor will bring nothing but death."

He was no doubt a humane and kindly creature, but definitely timid, if not actually defeatist. I tested his sincerity by telling him of reinforcements available in our space ship and describing how, in event of harm befalling us, a swift, devastating vengeance would descend upon the Holons.

His immediate reaction was horrified protest at any idea of

retaliatory slaughter, whereupon I felt certain that whatever might ensue during coming centuries the nucleus of a benign regime was present on Krellig and would survive.

For throughout planetary wanderings expeditions everywhere had encountered one indisputable, permanent galactical law—the vindication of right. Again and again, through rise and fall of countless civilisations, ageless history preached the identical sermon that, though evil might claim its triumphant hour, virtue eventually reigned supreme.

“Why worry?” asked young Hartnell. “We needn’t force them if they don’t want to come. It’s not as if we needed someone to show us the way.”

I nodded and was folding up the Mattus rod when a sudden, soft scuffling movement among the Shakkies made me swing round. Aiku and his friends were making short little bobbing runs on the tips of their bunched tentacles—tripping a few yards over the irregular rocks, then stopping and scurrying helplessly back again.

“What in Cassiopea’s the matter with them?” asked Tubby.

Then we saw something we had not noticed previously—something that made my heart flutter and caused a nasty sinking sensation in the stomach. Rising with slow menace behind us was a semi-circle of fully a dozen carapaced forms, effectively cutting off all retreat towards the Shakkies’ caves.

I grabbed my pistol and slipped off the safety catch.

Young Hartnell chuckled. “Steady, Pop. Remember what the book says—if you’re killed it’s either an accident or else they don’t know any better.” I noticed, however, that his own hand gripped the butt.

“Here come the Happy Holons!” murmured Tubby Goss, and I heard once more the clicking of his automatic cameras.

A warm feeling of thankfulness for two cool, trusty young companions replaced the coldness in my middle,

We could see the Holons clearly now, linked into a line by interlaced tentacles, remorsefully reducing the area in which our Shakkies teetered in terror. Their shells were much rougher and darker—possibly somewhat smaller—and their flesh a deeper shade of blue. They seemed, in short, a leaner, tougher breed than the cave-dwellers. In a spare tentacle each brandished an object like a black, broad-bladed sword.

"If they're closing in with the idea of finishing off Aiku and his friends we'd better do something," I said.

"Such as?"

I thought quickly, trying to plan a line of action that didn't conflict with headquarters' rigid regulations.

"Stand back," I told the others, "and see what happens."

Holding the extended Mattus rod at an angle of 45 degrees, I thrust myself boldly forward between the Shakkies and the steadily advancing Holons. Then I halted to await their approach.

It was the longest half-minute I remember, and all the time they came towards me I concentrated furiously upon every variety of thought which might give rise in tortoise brains to ideas of our superiority and "untouchableness."

For a few dreadful seconds I thought I had failed. Then the nearest Holon stretched out one of his seven disengaged tentacles towards the Mattus rod and prodded it gently, with obvious curiosity. Absurdly enough, in that moment of tension, I wondered idly how many they could spare from the central cluster without falling over, but next instant any such amiable thoughts were swept from my brain by a flood of idea-impulses so vivid and evil that I gasped aloud.

The explanation quickly dawned upon me. Operators are warned never to allow a Mattus rod to touch the subject, because suspicious creatures at first regard the apparatus as some sort of weapon, and in conversation with Aiku I had rigidly observed this advice, holding the receiver near his thick shell at a point where I hoped the brain was located.

In this case, however, the Holon's tentacle—a highly-sensitive organ, it appeared—provided a direct path to the brain along delicate, perceptive nerve fibres which to all intents and purposes were actually in direct contact with the Mattus.

And I felt that I gazed upon a wide, dark pool—so seething with treachery, corruption and cruelty that it drew me, horribly fascinated, toward heaving black depths. Only a quick switch-off saved my reeling senses—and simultaneously betrayed to the Holon a weakness I should have done better to conceal.

Hurriedly, I told Hartnell and Tubby what had happened.

“Do you think they know exactly what the Mattus is? Unless this Holon realises he was looking into your mind he may not know what happened. Look—he's still wondering.”

The blue, waving tentacle repeatedly tapped the rod, as though endeavouring to obtain a repetition of the sensation its owner received when it was “alive.”

“Old Aiku soon grasped the idea—why shouldn't this one?”

“Try again, Pop,” suggested Hartnell, with sagacity beyond his years. “You'll be prepared for something ghastly this time and perhaps you can beat him down.”

I drew a deep breath of resolution, frankly finding no attraction in the prospect of once more probing that mass of foul, hideous idea-impulses.

The Holon was ready for me! He had waited, his tentacle touching the Mattus rod, prepared to smash my will-power by sheer mental strength.

I imagine that while I was warning Hartnell and Tubby, he, in turn, had been consulting his revolting companions, squeaking in unbelievably high-pitched tones far beyond the range of our own ears.

Exactly what they advised in return I shall never know, but on the instant that the switch again made contact there swept

into my mind an overwhelming impression of irresistible domination.

"Resistance is useless—surrender yourselves without fighting—you are outnumbered—we are stronger—you will be taken to Kor, there to face Thung, Emperor of Krellig, before you die!"

History has heard such sentiments a thousand times repeated. They form both the battle-cry of conceited armies and the morale-sapping weapon of propagandists. My own mind had been too slow and weak to ram home a message of peaceful intentions, even had the Holons been prepared to take notice. In what some might call a cowardly fashion, I switched off again. Personally, I don't think it cowardly to wish to save one's sanity.

Young Hartnell, of course, refused to be subdued. "We always wanted to get to Kor, anyway."

Behind the facepiece of his helmet I saw his brown face crinkle in a grin, answered by another from Tubby, who said, "How do you think we stand about those regulations, Pop? Would it be out of order if I loosed a shot or two at them?"

The Holons advanced again, shepherding us before them down the slope towards the level ground on which Kor stood. A strange party we looked, indeed, although from my position I was unable to see the complete picture. Imagine a semi-circle of dancing mushrooms, tentacles interlocked, urging forward four other mushrooms whose steps were not nearly so sprightly and three bifurcated objects in bulging atmosphere suits who plodded painfully a pace at a time over the shiny, uneven rock.

I held the Mattus rod before me, hoping lack of mechanical knowledge would prevent our captors realising it slid telescopically into the small handle. In this position it remained ready for action, and by degrees I eased it round so that while we marched the tip hovered near Aiku's shell. None save the

two of us knew when I pressed the switch inside my glove.

Fear was there again—fear and resignation to an inevitable fate—but no hatred. If I were unaware before, I knew now which race upon Krellig merited survival. Whether the present generation of Shakkies would ever enjoy their deserved inheritance was another matter.

“What’s likely to happen?” I asked Aiku.

“You will be taken before the man who calls himself the ‘emperor’ and shown to him as curiosities before being killed.” It was strange how Aiku’s thought-impulses always described himself and his fellow-creatures as “men.” “We Shakkies will be interrogated and then executed.”

“Interrogated?”

The answer I received was a shock—and yet it was nothing more than the action of tyrants through the ages. “They accuse us of preparing to receive weapons from you, so that we might rebel against them! We are expected to confess before we are killed.”

“But that’s absurd—preposterous!”

“Nevertheless,” said Aiku, with calm resignation, “that is what they believe—and that is what they will do. Nothing remains except to submit.”

Strangely enough, no possibility seemed to enter his mind of calling upon us to destroy the Holons with our gamma-pistols, which I had previously described to him.

“Tell me more about Kor,” I said, thinking that even if the worst came to the worst I might manage to transmit to the space-ship information of value to any future expedition. “It is a big city—even by standards of other planets. How many Holons are there?”

“About four thousand.”

Four thousand? I stared again at the vast, dead-black nightmarish conglomeration of buildings now looming high

before us. A mistake, surely! Even that part of the city within eye-range must contain many thousands of separate edifices. Were they all, then, bare and uninhabited?

I wondered for a moment whether there might be misunderstanding about numerical calculations, recalling an experience many years ago on a tiny but incredibly ancient world back near Bootes, where the digit "1" acquired a value as near as we could ascertain of 1.3857. The fantastic difficulties in such circumstances of a simple exercise like finding the cube root of, say, 8,018 are readily apparent.

Anyone who suggests an expedient of multiplying 8,018 by 1.3857 and determining the root from the product is obviously no mathematician, because for every single digit by our standards there is a theoretical minus quantity of .3857.

The figures, in fact, denote 1.3857 but the actual worth is merely "1." In resolving this state of affairs we are left with a further series of surplus .3857 values, stretching apparently to infinity—which is all very well with recurring decimals but in this case prevents one obtaining any answer at all until the thing has been worked out back to where it started.

Many highly-intricate and expensive calculating machines in the H.Q. mathematical section fused themselves before the problem was finally shelved as a scientific curiosity.

"Four thousand," repeated Aiku. "They outnumber us by about three to one."

The figure was definitely correct.

"Beneath Kor lie tunnels where much food grows and water runs. The city has been constructed above these caves, to which each principal section of population has its own entrances. Every Holon devotes his life to building the city higher and wider—it is their god, and for centuries the light-machine they discovered has been turning out material constantly to make this shrine more impressive."

So much had the Shakkie spies learned, but Aiku could provide only the sketchiest idea of the city's topography. There was, I gathered, a gigantic central building forming Thung's palace; a great enclosed space—thoroughly guarded—where the wondrous machine operated; several wide thoroughfares and a mass of narrow canyons between towering black skyscrapers.

One of the Holons, becoming suspicious, left the semi-circle and tried to grab the Mattus rod. Luckily, I forestalled him, hurriedly switching off and snapping the retractor lever so that the sections shot back into the handle. He hesitated, antennæ throbbing with obvious curiosity, but eventually resumed his place with the others.

"Well, young Hartnell," I said. "This seems like the time to put in an emergency call to the ship."

"So I've been thinking, Pop." He grinned again, but on this occasion the smile was obviously forced. "Not much hope of escaping this little lot without violence. Do you think they've any weak spots? Could we kick their tentacles from under them or something?"

"I don't like those queer axes they carry," I said. "The Shakkies are obviously terrified of them."

"Go on, Pop," urged Tubby. "Call up the ship."

It began to grow dark. Not only was night falling on Krellig, shutting off that dim, green radiance from the clouds, but we were now coming within the dreadful shadow of Kor.

Even the controller's level, impersonal voice betrayed faint undertones of interest when I described our plight. "Leave distress signals switched on for direction-finding," he said.

Tubby gave a hollow laugh. "Looks like we're just another sacrifice squad."

He had reason for pessimism. The controller was bound by the same rules and regulations which affected us. Before

another expedition arrived we would have been hustled into the city's mazes. Holons would undoubtedly notice strange figures searching the place and capture them, too—unless some "definite act of hostility" had been committed.

"Three of us," said Hartnell, bitterly. "Just enough to make gamma pistols legal—for somebody else!"

"Never mind," I said. "We aren't the first and I don't suppose we'll be the last. Perhaps they'll ease the rules a little after this."

"I suppose verbal and mental threats aren't officially hostile because somebody might only be joking. Somehow I don't think Holons have a very strong sense of humour."

I made sure the distress signal note was transmitting loud and clear as we entered the pitch-blackness of Kor. Once inside those high walls we might not have known whether we were traversing an ordinary street or a vast square, except that on either side of us we could somehow sense the nearness of vast grotesque edifices.

Hanging back in the darkness for fear of stumbling, I felt a firm, springy push between my shoulder-blades—a Holon tentacle urging me onwards.

"Where are we?" asked Hartnell. "Let's grab hands in case we're accidentally separated."

"Doesn't something strike you?" I said, in a low voice. "Your tortoise friends can see in the dark."

He was silent for a moment, thinking it over. "That," he said, at last, "is just plain impossible! Nothing can see without light unless——"

"Well?"

"Unless they don't see light at all—light as we know it. Remember a radar system doesn't 'see' by light. It merely detects solids. Maybe those antennæ work similarly."

I smiled to myself. Was a botanist actually going to teach

a physicist his own business? "And the human eye," I said, softly. "Does that see light or does it detect solids? And isn't light solid, after a fashion——?"

He chuckled, deep in his throat. "One up to you, Pop! Yes, I agree light can be a solid of sorts—after seeing Kor."

"How in the name of Andromeda you two can enjoy a theoretical argument while we're being shoved through this ghastly place beats me," said Tubby, impatiently. "Whatever they do, I'm going to use my torch."

The beam of his beryllium lamp shone along that unholy street. I was ready for the automatic anti-glare filter in my face visor to click gently, protecting eyes from unaccustomed glare. Instead, the torch merely threw a faint pink streak into the blackness ahead. It was barely sufficient to reveal a clear path lying before us—that and nothing more.

"What——?" began Goss. He agitated the switch several times, but in vain. "The thing's not working properly. Try yours, Pop."

I did so, with similar results. Nor was Hartnell's torch any more successful. "I can't understand it——"

"At least, we're not groping through a place as black as the Coalsack," said Tubby, thankfully.

"You notice the Holons don't seem to be bothering about it? Does that prove, I wonder, that they can't see light?"

"Ask old Aiku next time you get a chance to use the Mattus."

On the point of reply, I suddenly became aware of a development that almost made my heart stop beating. If our plight had been precarious previously, it was now entirely lost. Should I tell Hartnell and Goss? After brief debate, I decided to remain silent—at least for the present.

We were being urged through the streets of Kor with increasing speed. Our path turned left, then right, then right.

again in bewildering changes of direction, and had it not been for the dim, rosy glow of our lamps we must surely have blundered into buildings. The way was unpaved—the same uneven, fused rock we had encountered outside.

The Holons pressed on, faster and faster, until we were practically running, guided all the time by tentacles prodding our backs. Either they wished to meet some time-table or—could they be scared? Did they know about our space-ship and were expecting pursuit?

Mysteriously there was borne upon me, without the aid of the Mattus machine and despite being enclosed in an hermetically-sealed suit, an idea that these Holons experienced a vague oppressiveness and stirrings of panic. I thought I detected a faint rumbling sound, like distant thunder, and a movement of air in Krellig's hitherto uncannily-still atmosphere.

Turning my outside microphone to full power for a moment, I confirmed that this was indeed the case. A storm brewing perhaps; maybe Holons didn't care to get wet.

We came at last to an immense entrance—large in size but quite undecorated, merely a great, square, black gap in a plain black wall. Echoes from our footsteps (the tentacles of both Holon and Shakkie made practically no sound) disclosed an enormously high roof. Counting my hurrying paces, I made this chamber fully two hundred and fifty yards long, with no supporting columns in range of our enfeebled lamps. Quite a feat of architecture, in fact.

Then we traversed passages and climbed "steps" to yet further corridors. The term "steps" is in absence of any other suitable word—in reality they were ramps bearing a corrugated surface in which tentacles found a grip but along which we stumbled and slid with difficulty.

At last the three of us were hauled to a standstill from behind. I had noticed no break in the corridor enclosure,

yet an opening somehow materialised before us at ground level, approximately four feet square. It would suffice, as young Hartnell said afterwards, to accommodate a Shakkie "on bended knees."

We were seized by neck and ankles and slung like so many parcels down a chute, after which the entrance closed behind us.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE WEDGE OF LIGHT

FINDING our feet again, we streaked flashlights around to locate one another. Here in this cell—about ten feet by twelve—the pink beams shone even paler, showing as faintly-luminous pencils criss-crossing the almost palpable darkness.

“Well,” said Hartnell. “Here we are in Kor at last. I’m unable to congratulate anybody on the hotel accommodation and I’d like someone to direct me to the way out.”

Tubby was puzzling over his beryllium torch. “I can’t understand it. These things just don’t go wrong.”

I said, “I wonder where they’ve taken Aiku.”

As you see, each of us had at least one problem on his mind.

The cell was quite bare, walls and floor constructed of identical material. It contained no window. We appeared to be imprisoned by a square of black substance over the entrance. Undoubtedly it slid up and down between guide-rails on the outside, but internally there was no means of obtaining a grip.

I banged my hand on the walls. They seemed quite smooth and as solid as steel plate.

Hartnell shook his head. “No use, Pop. They won’t break—and if they’re really made of light-material, as we’ve

been told, I can't think of a single thing that'll knock a hole in 'em."

"A tungsten flame-drill, perhaps?"

"Not a hope—even if we had one. The stuff may look like metal, but it isn't. The only thing that might have effect is a gamma pistol—even then the rays could either pass right through or bounce back—rather to our detriment in this cubby-hole. Don't you see that anything composed of accumulated light vibrations must be enormously solid? The compression of neutrons——" He broke off. "Listen—what's that?"

"I didn't hear anything," I said.

Tubby nodded. "A rumbling sound. I thought I noticed it when we were outside.——"

"No, nothing like that—a sort of tapping."

Then all of us heard it—a repeated double knock, slight but definite. We moved quickly to the wall which I had rapped a few moments previously. I banged again, harder.

In reply came the double knock, repeated.

"The Mattus rod!" yelled Hartnell. "Hold it against the wall, Pop! The tapping's just on the other side."

It was Aiku. He had been flung, alone, into an adjoining cell. His companions had been removed for "interrogation."

"We are in Thung's palace," he told me, "not far from the Place of Building." This was where the Old Ones' strange machine rested, condensing Krellig's weird, greenish light into black slabs. "I sounded the wall seeking to find who might be next to my cell, because we would be comrades in misfortune. Our cells are reserved for men condemned to face the Sacrifice of Light——"

"What in Betelgeuse is that?" demanded Goss, when I translated.

"Something very unpleasant, no doubt."

Hartnell strode up and down in the faint, pink glow of our

torches. "Light—light—always this emphasis on light! And yet I'm convinced, Pop, that the tortoises don't know any difference between daylight and dark. Try a few test questions."

Quickly I turned possibilities over in my mind, trying to find the most favourable approach. "The light-machine," I asked Aiku. "Is it operating always? Describe it to me."

"I have never seen it, of course, nor does anyone understand the principles employed." I sensed his wistful yearning for a laboratory full of equipment with which to put into practice the inherited theoretical knowledge stored in his brain. "From what we learn, I imagine the machine as a great bowl, upturned to the sky, where the light always floats——"

"Always?"

"Certainly!" He seemed startled. "You have seen it yourself. It is always there—swirling and hovering. How the essence of it reaches the machine we do not know—but light has always been present in the upper portions of the atmosphere. If we were out of this dreadful place we should see it now."

Swirling and hovering? Aiku meant the clouds, of course. But always?

"When night comes," I continued, cunningly, "does the machine still work?"

"Night?" His mind staggered with bewilderment. "What is night?"

Instead of trying to explain light to a blind man, I faced the equally difficult task of describing darkness to one who had never experienced it. "Krellig revolves once in sixteen and a quarter hours; therefore comes a period when its face is turned away from Delta Kasta, its sun, and no light falls."

"Of this," said Aiku, "I know nothing. But the light is always there."

("Stubborn old tortoise!" said Hartnell.)

"The machine," I continued, patiently, "does it operate continuously, hour upon hour?"

"After eight hours' work it must rest for eight hours. The machine was so built by the Old Ones that it stops automatically."

Matters had by now become fairly conclusive. The apparatus obviously ceased manufacture when dusk fell, beginning again at dawn; the "light which was always there" could be nothing except clouds recording their presence—by day and by night—on the Shakkies' "radar" senses.

"This explains quite a lot," said Hartnell, thoughtfully. "The Holons didn't object to our using torches to light our way through the streets—because they couldn't see them. Opens up some interesting possibilities, doesn't it, Pop?"

"We might do better if these confounded lamps would work properly," said Tubby, discouragingly.

"You know," went on Hartnell, "I've got a theory about that. It's rather long-winded, so we might as well sit down, even though the floor's a bit hard. Afterwards I want to try an experiment." He laughed with genuine amusement. "It might get us out of here or it might blow Kor to pieces—and ourselves with it."

His theory—and I believe I've previously mentioned my respect for young Hartnell's ability as a physicist—concerned the absence of red from Krellig's spectrum and the weird light which bathed the planet. Some peculiar quality in the ever-present clouds absorbed red rays, leaving visible only that awful, greenish radiance. Yellow and blue, therefore, composed the light from which the Old Ones' machine manufactured the fabric used to construct the city.

"Remember that point," urged Hartnell, "because I'm coming back to it later."

Some powerful negative potential must of necessity be employed to anchor the accumulated vibrations in tough, metallic slabs, otherwise one of two things must happen: (1)

slow disintegration in the form of visible discharges; (2) reflection of external electrons falling upon the surface from light-rays. Nothing either emanated or was reflected from Kor's dead-black buildings. What, then, became of light-ions impacting upon the material? Obviously, the potential was such that they became absorbed, imperceptibly increasing the mass.

"The torches," he continued, "normally emit a white light—but what happens? The greedy potential in those walls sucks away all yellow and blue elements, leaving only a faded pink. Didn't you notice it became even fainter when we left the street and were more enclosed?"

Young Hartnell clearly envisaged some plan of action. I could tell by his quicker, more eager breathing and his way of speaking. Expectation soared high in that grim, dark cell.

"What," he asked, speaking more slowly now that he had reached the climax of his argument, "is likely to happen if we could introduce a red element into that yellow-and-blue conglomeration?"

There was silence for a full ten seconds while we considered the implications.

"If you could," I said, at last, "and I emphasise the 'if,' Kor would probably disappear in a sudden flash."

"We're quite a long way up," added Tubby, "and we'd go down with an awful bump."

"The whole point," said Hartnell, enthusiastically, "is that red light has never fallen on these walls——"

"Wait a moment—what about the torches? They throw a pinkish glow, don't they?"

He gestured impatiently. "That redness is only a residue—a sort of rubbishy remainder. No, I mean a proper, definite, positive red—a red in its own right, as it were."

Goss registered sudden alarm. "Look here—I can't get the generator out of my infra-red camera without puncturing the atmosphere suit——"

"All right, all right, Tubby. As a matter of fact, I never even thought about your box of tricks. No, Mother Earth's going to assist in the experiment—dear old Mother Earth."

He fumbled through the space-lock pocket of his suit and brought out, holding it before us in the palm of his hand, the crystal prism, he always carried fastened by a tiny beryllium chain to a fold of his uniform. "There she is, the little beauty."

Now his plan became understandable. The idea was to shine a torch through the prism, thereby creating a certain amount of clear, red illumination which would fall upon those yellow-and-blue light-metal walls—with what effect none of us knew.

"The full ingenuity of this scheme seems to be lost on you," crowed young Hartnell, delightedly. "I don't propose merely to spray a lot of pretty rainbows round the room. Hasn't it struck you that a prism's cut in the form of a wedge? And doesn't the spectrum emerge—also like a wedge?"

I gasped. Here was something like genius. With the face of that prism placed close to a wall, the wedge of light would be smaller and consequently more powerful. Negative potential would suck in first the blue end of the spectrum, then the yellow section—and then? The red portion might either be quietly repelled or violently driven inwards by the very forces which held the fabric together.

"A light-wedge!" murmured Tubby, wonderingly. "A wedge of light to break open a wall of light. Very appropriate."

"We'd better see if old Aiku knows any more about the lay-out of this place," I suggested. "In case the idea works we don't want to find ourselves hanging by the eyebrows from an outside ledge."

Our patient Shakkie still held his post on the other side of the wall. The cells, he told me, were somewhere in the centre of the palace, situated for convenient access to the

Hall of Homage, whither we should undoubtedly be taken before execution.

"Cheerful little soul, isn't he?" asked Hartnell. "We'd better try the corridor wall, then. That's the way we came in—and if we manage to break it down it's a way we can go out. Tell him to squat down in the farthest corner and wait for something to happen."

I must confess that Aiku's reaction was not particularly optimistic, but the thought-impulses from the Mattus rod faded abruptly, so I suppose he did as we suggested.

"Now, then," said Hartnell, briskly. "To work!"

We had to find some means of concentrating the power of our torches. White light needed to actuate the prism must be protected against the enervating effect of surrounding "metal" and it might also be wise for the operators to remain as far as possible from the point of impact. One lamp was therefore left in working order, the other two dismantled and their cylindrical outer cases clamped end to end in the form of an extension tube. In the open end we fixed the prism, making a light-tight joint with adhesive plastic tape.

Hartnell aimed the tube at a point about two feet left of the sliding barricade, lying on the floor so that it pointed upwards at an angle of forty degrees. I lay beside him, ready to release the torch switch. We hoped in this way to escape the full force of a possible light-blast.

"If we all blow up," said Tubby, "and the cameras survive, at least there'll be a record for headquarters to collect. It might interest you to know I've taken some infra-red shots of your little set-up."

"You young fool!" I said, rattled. "Suppose infra-red had set off the light-metal and——"

"Well, it didn't, did it?"

"No-o-o," I agreed, somewhat reluctantly and ashamed of my snappishness. Probably nerves were to blame. In that prone position, amid pitch darkness, preparing to press the

switch of a torch extension while Hartnell rammed the prism end tightly against the wall, I could feel cold sweat streaming between my shoulder-blades.

Hartnell never turned a hair. "Right?" he asked, coolly.

"Already rolling," said Tubby. They might have been starting up some interesting and harmless toy.

"Right! Let her go, Pop."

There has survived through the ages in the English tongue a very expressive phrase that "he never knew what hit him." They talk, also, about the quickness of thought, yet by the time my sluggish brain appreciated the situation everything was over.

Certainly, it took me a full second to realise what had happened in that black and dreadful cell. On the other hand, the beryllium torch produced its beam, the prism formed a rainbow wedge; the light-metal wall dragged this wedge into its electronic structure with savage violence—all at the 186,000 miles per second speed of light itself—and in a mere fraction of time afterwards the waste products of that terrific blow dissipated themselves.

We actually *felt* the stunning release of light waves press through the fabric of our atmosphere suits. Expecting high velocity discharges far too fast for our visor anti-glare filters to anticipate, we had lowered the full battery of almost opaque screens, together a full half-inch thick. Nevertheless, that impossibly-brilliant green radiance shone through my closed eyelids, leaving multi-coloured stars and rockets streaking across the retina.

For a moment all three of us remained where we lay, trying to collect our whirling senses. One thing was certain; we were still alive—and still prisoners.

Young Hartnell stirred first. "Everybody all right? Let's see what happened."

He wrenched his torch from the improvised extension tube and shone it upon the black wall where the prism had been

pressed. In the feeble pink beam we saw a ragged hole about half-an-inch across.

Tubby had blundered across to us through the darkness, muttering something about being thankful he had the sense to use an infra-red camera as well as direct-light apparatus. Upon seeing the punctured wall, he and Hartnell joined in a chorus of triumph. The aperture, of course, was subjected to a ceremonial close-up picture for the record.

"How long will it take us to cut a hole big enough to crawl through?" I asked. "And do you think our eyeballs can stand it?"

"The emission's pretty fierce, isn't it?" chuckled Hartnell. "Still, we've discovered a solution and the best thing now is to get busy before those confounded Holons come back."

Aiku was tapping on the wall again. I snapped out the Mattus rod and tried to tell him what we had accomplished. Apparently he had heard or seen nothing of the experiment's spectacular result. On the other hand, there was news for us.

"We are summoned before Thung! The Holons have been chanting the Song of Sacrifice for nearly an hour—but I forgot, you cannot hear them—and my three comrades are dead. The executioners are entering the corridor already. In case I can speak to you no more, farewell——"

"Quickly!" I said. "So that we may think of a plan—how were your comrades killed?"

"As Holons always kill Shakkies—with their scimitars. The blades are shavings of light-material—exceptionally thin and therefore very sharp. My friends have been ceremonially hacked to pieces at the feet of Thung in the great hall. Be thankful, O Men of Earth, that your ears are not attuned to receive their dying cries or understand the awful rites that accompanied their end."

There didn't seem much we could do about that. While I fought back the shivers of horror which frisked along my spine, Aiku suddenly said, "They are in my cell now!

Farewell——” Thought impulses along the Mattus rod once more abruptly faded into emptiness.

“ Watch the door!” I said, urgently. “ Aiku’s just been taken. We might be on the list, too.”

There came again the rumbling sound we had noticed on previous occasions. It sounded louder and seemed to thunder dully beneath the very foundations of Kor. We waited in silence until the reverberations had died away, faces dimly seen behind visor-plates against the pinkish glow of the torch.

“ I wonder,” said Hartnell, thoughtfully, “ whether our little experiment may not have done more damage than we thought.”

“ Just to cheer you up,” I said, speaking of a secret I had been hugging for quite a time, “ I might as well let you know the distress-signal isn’t transmitting. It stopped going out the moment we came inside these horrible walls. Even if they send an expedition from the space ship they’ll never find us, because they won’t get a direction-fix.”

Then the Holon executioners were at the door.

CHAPTER SIX

FORTY THOUSAND TENTACLES

"**F**OR the sake of sweet Saggiarius," said Hartnell, "slip those torches together again. We'll be lost without them."

He held his lamp near, so that by its anæmic glow we might reassemble our own from the improvised apparatus we had used to puncture the light-metal. Immediately we had clipped the cases secure again, he replaced the precious prism in his uniform. Then we stood in the darkness—waiting.

"No sense in staying at any bigger disadvantage," I suggested. "Even if a torch doesn't give much light it's better than nothing—and we might as well know when they arrive."

I directed my lamp upon the entrance. The impression, against that dead-black material, was of a pink beam shining into a bottomless pit. Nothing was reflected from the point where the pencil of light ended.

Then the barrier slid up almost noiselessly and a Holon carapace appeared at floor level, writhing tentacles spreading horizontally from its rim almost in the form of a corona as the creature scraped through the aperture.

He heaved himself upright, gathering nine tentacles into a solid stalk for support. In the remaining "hand" he

gripped one of those dreadful-looking black knives.

Next instant, while we apprehensively awaited developments, he collapsed. It was as if the "stalk" holding up his shell had been transmuted suddenly into rubber. The floor shook with the weight of his heavy body.

"Great Gemini!" exclaimed Tubby Goss. "What's happened to him?"

"The lamp, Pop!" said Hartnell. I still stood there, directing the torch-beam towards the Holon's rough, horny carapace. "I don't remember any of us turning one on the tortoises before. They aren't used to red rays—only yellow and blue. Red must be sheer poison to them! Probably penetrates and disrupts vital tissues——"

My mind was concerned with rules and regulations. "He may not be dead—just paralysed. Anyway, it was an accident."

Hartnell shook his head admiringly, grinning with delight. "Pop," he said, "you're a cunning old botanist. Trust you to find a loophole in the law books."

"That," I said, aghast at his interpretation of an innocent remark, "is a thorough and wilful distortion of what I meant, young Hartnell."

He smiled even more widely. "I'll bet it is. Still, it's a comfort to know we've an excuse of sorts. We can always tell headquarters we didn't know the torch was loaded."

"Perhaps," said Tubby, slowly, "it's a coincidence. I expect both Shakkies and Holons die naturally sometimes. Or he might have been down in the dungeons gobbling fungi and collapsed with indigestion."

Levity was all very well—probably born of relief at finding ourselves possessed of a simple weapon we could use instead of the gamma pistols, about the firing of which headquarters are always stuffy—but the incident might have highly serious consequences.

If the Holons discovered we had killed one of their number, any hope of our survival would disappear. Further deliberate use of the torch would be contrary to regulations and would most likely take us in front of a court martial were our action discovered.

The ban concerned itself with the killing of intelligent creatures—unless “proved hostile beyond doubt”—and none could deny that the tortoise-men were intelligent.

Apart from accident, murder and suicide, there are two ways in which men meet violent death—(1) a deliberate laying down of life to save comrades; (2) perishing while obeying orders. We had entered Inter-X service with open eyes; therefore we must accept the risks.

I recalled unpleasant memories of some who had found themselves caught up in legal processes. Guilty men suffered positive punishment, but in one or two instances accused persons had spent the rest of their lives in custody without charges being proved. Attempts by the courts to administer justice with scrupulous accuracy often mean references to higher authorities several light years away. Whether we shall ever persuade radio waves to race the 186,000 miles a second speed of light I don't know, but that's our limit at present. On all main routes, communications men have now established automatic relay stations in the form of artificial galactical bodies; even so, a message to Earth, travelling continuously, takes twenty-eight years to arrive—and another twenty-eight for the answer to return.

Small wonder that poor old Gustav Crotchet, whom they blamed for running amok with a ray gun on Monnop III way back in AD 3228 and starting an unpleasant war which kept us away from valuable cobalt deposits for nearly fifty years, never knew he had been eventually acquitted. Back-and-forth argument swallowed up the years while he rotted in jail. It took nearly three centuries before the matter was finally settled to legal experts' satisfaction.

In the brief time my mind had been thus occupied, Holons in the corridor dragged the dead guard away. We heard his shell scraping along the floor, though I dared not switch on the torch again to see what was happening.

They wasted no time with nonsense such as telling us to "come quietly." Tentacles snapped a grip like a couple of pythons round my upper arms and I was hauled roughly into the corridor, ducking low as we left the cell to avoid cracking my helmet. Immediate reaction, strangely enough, was not fear of what lay ahead in the Hall of Homage but concern that ignorant handling might rip the atmosphere suit.

I mentioned the matter to Hartnell. "Pity if they did that," he said, wryly. "Old Thung wouldn't like his fun being spoiled."

It became evident as we progressed that our escort consisted of six Holons—two per man, holding him firmly at the biceps. This meant I was able to use my forearms, so I kept both torch and Mattus rod at the "ready." Evidently they had not yet connected their stricken companion with either piece of apparatus although, with their strange sensory perceptions, they must have noticed the objects. Maybe they considered them actual portions of our bodies.

The corridor soon came to an end. Once again our foot-falls betrayed the fact that we had entered another vast chamber similar to that through which we passed shortly after leaving the street, although in this latter place the roof must have been much higher.

But there was something else—a vague, whispering sound almost impossible to define. The only time I heard anything similar was when I stood above a glass-lined tank half-filled with spider-serpents from Zallot's foulest swamps.

Understanding came telepathically rather than by direct observation. The great hall was filled with Holons. This must be the place from which came the barbarous sacri-

ficial chanting Aiku had heard! Yet we could not see them and dared not switch on our torches. We were apparently in the very presence of Thung, yet we could not see him either. For all I knew he might be ranting and raving at us, suspecting us of deliberate defiance. To all intents and purposes we stood amid that great concourse blind, deaf and dumb. Only the executioners grasp upon our arms was real.

"This is ghastly," muttered Hartnell. "I wish we could know what's going on."

"If ever we get out of here," said Tubby, determinedly, "I'm going to earn a huge bonus by suggesting infra-red filters in these helmets. Doesn't it make you sick to think I'm taking pictures all the time of the weirdest collection of bogeys ever brought together in one place—and we may never see 'em?" His voice rose to that characteristic wail of a frustrated photographer. "I want to get a close-up of old Thung and I don't know where to focus."

"I've been gradually lowering my torch," I said. "I've done it slowly in the hope that they won't spot anything. In a minute I'm going to shine it on the floor."

"Don't be long," advised Hartnell. "They're bound to notice soon that you're the only one of us brandishing a Mattus rod and they'll get curious."

His well-meant warning came somewhat late. In the darkness I felt the slender chromium spring seized so violently that it was nearly torn from my hand. After experience with the Holons who had captured us, I was sufficiently cautious to leave the apparatus switched off. Now I had to decide quickly whether the receiver rod was being examined out of sheer inquisitiveness or if the Mattus machine's purpose had been understood, but almost immediately the grip relaxed.

"Listen!" cried Tubby, suddenly. "Listen! I've turned

up my outside microphone to full strength. I thought I might hear them if they're moving around. And they are—a queer sort of shuffling!”

“The direction?” I asked. “Are they mostly in front of us? To the left? Or where?”

“Behind us. But I've heard something else—there's a full-sized hurricane getting up outside!”

When we first emerged from the space-ship Krellig's atmosphere had been remarkable for its unholy stillness. Once or twice we had sensed a breeze. Now Tubby talked of a hurricane.

Hartnell and I, following his example, heard it too. High velocity winds raised weird shrieks as they tore between Kor's black skyscrapers, the note rising and falling eerily with successive gusts. Sometimes it screeched higher and higher until the thin, piercing tone hurled itself beyond range of our eardrums.

“That rumbling we heard must have been thunder,” said Hartnell. “Quite a storm, eh?”

“Look here,” I said, “I'm going to take a chance and switch on the Mattus machine before I try the torch. This place must be crammed with Holons. I ought to be able to get a general impression of what's afoot.”

“Watch out for auto-hypnosis,” warned Tubby, with concern. “From what you told us about last time these particular tortoises are tougher than Shakkies.”

“I will!” I promised, grimly.

I pressed the switch. Immediately a tumult of unspeakable indescribable emotions poured in upon me. There was searing hate, blood-lust, frenzied anticipation of horrible cruelties—and a vague undercurrent of fear.

I concentrated upon the fear, trying to analyse its cause. It was a dread of the unexpected, the unknown. Beyond

ascertaining that I was baffled. Could our presence possibly be the reason? Watchers from the tall towers of Kor might easily have seen our ship land. Did they guess we came from another planet? Were they afraid of destructive powers we might possess?

And then, cutting across the confused babble of evil like a clear, high voice over mutterings of an angry mob, I "heard" a distinct call. It was Aiku.

"Where are you?" I demanded, joyfully.

"All four of us are standing in a line before the throne of Thung. Guards are on either side, two to each man. Behind us they begin the Dance of Sacrifice. Can you not hear the chanting?"

I reminded him why we could not. "Tell me, am I mistaken, or do they really fear us?"

"That is true. They are afraid, therefore most dangerous. That is why they will kill——" He paused, and when I no longer had definite focus for concentration, that evil background surged forward again, this time making my head swim with a definite insidious rhythm. I recognised it for the rhythm of the Holons' dance. In the fashion of many primitive beings throughout the universe, they were intoxicating themselves to a frenzy before committing some awful deed.

"Be careful," warned Aiku. "Thung is studying you. He has been told something of your thought-machine's purpose. Probably he intends to communicate with you direct, ordering you to stop the great winds that threaten his city."

The series of question marks via the Mattus rod must have puzzled him. "Can you hear them, too?" I asked excitedly.

"Certainly. The low, growling noise frightened the Holons at first——"

Low? Growling? Those sounds, of course, were the screeching gusts rising beyond perception by our own ears

and coming barely into range of the tortoise-men's senses.

"——until it was remembered that many, many years ago the air suddenly began to groan as it does now. The story has been passed from father to son through generations. Is it really you, O Men of Earth, who have brought this about? "

" No," I said truthfully. " It is none of our doing."

He seemed disappointed. " Nor the strange vibrations which shake the tunnels beneath Kor? "

" No," I said, again.

" Then Thung will surely order you to be killed. Only the belief that you caused these visitations has held his hand. Nothing will save you when he learns the truth. Farewell."

Aiku's continual pessimistic leave-taking began to sound rather monotonous. I was on the point of telling him so, in a rather irritable fashion, when the Mattus rod was grasped again and all other thought-impulses were shut out by a wave of gigantic, writhing foulness which swept into my mind with such force that I reeled physically. Tentacles round each arm tightened convulsively and jerked me upright again.

I knew what was happening. I was looking into the mind of Thung. Helplessly " staring " as it were into a unutterable seething pit of mental corruption, I felt myself swaying on the brink. Tubby's warning about auto-hypnosis stirred feebly at the back of my recollection but I could do nothing about it.

Only the Holon emperor's colossal self-conceit saved me from surrender and madness, for I could not even move the Mattus switch. A great, boasting voice seemed to boom out across the abyss, diverting my attention from that awful fascination which lured me towards the depths.

" I am Thung! " said the voice. " Gaze upon me and tremble before you die, O creatures of conspiracy."

Conspiracy? It was the old madness and suspicion, of course." Those who raised themselves by treachery and misuse of power always feared similar action by others might bring about their eventual downfall.

He translated my puzzlement into evasion.

"Pretence is useless! Whence you come I neither know nor care. Your presence in company of the contemptible Shakkies suffices to condemn you. The strange machine that opens the minds of men——" he meant the Mattus apparatus "——that causes the air to moan and the earth of Krellig to tremble will avail you nought. We do not fear these manifestations——"

Obsessed with his harangue, Thung failed to notice my surge of relief. Events were falling into recognisable pattern. He lied when saying the Holons were not afraid.

"Your purpose is to assist the Shakkies against their rightful masters! Against me—Thung! Yet my executioners have found you and brought you before my throne. Is that not proof of my power? Soon shall we drag the wilful Shakkies from their hiding places in the secret catacombs under the hills—every one of them—and they, too, shall be killed like the others. All shall learn they cannot escape the long arms of Thung!"

Now I understood the trend of his thoughts, my mind escaped domination. Awaiting the inevitable development—threats or bribes to calm aerial storms he mistakenly attributed to our influence—I groped for mental pictures of our surroundings. Sufficient images swarmed amid the ether to etch it clearly.

The great Hall of Homage comprised nothing more than a vast rectangular black box—without arches, windows, ornamentation or furniture. Close against the wall before us rose a dais, some three feet high, with corrugated ramps providing access. In the centre stood a square platform, no more

decorative than a packing case, on which Thung crouched, nine tentacles dangling around his abnormally large carapace and the tenth stretching forth to grasp the Mattus rod.

In rows and tiers behind us ranged the Holon assembly, some wildly dancing on "tip-toe," others swaying monotonously to weird, silent chanting. Their numbers totalled more than three thousand. Almost the entire population of Kor was assembled there, urging themselves to frenzy—partly in expectation of blood, partly to shut out the growing terror of that moaning winds.

And there three human beings stood, sweating and breathless in their atmosphere suits, in almost complete silence and entire darkness. The tension must have told more strongly upon Hartnell and Tubby, for I at least had some idea of our surroundings. The others could do nothing save stand blindly waiting—listening to the faint, slithering whisper of nearly forty thousand Holon tentacles upon the floor.

"Thung says we must stop the hurricane—or else!" I told them, briefly. "I think he'll try to strike a bargain soon. At the moment he's trying a little totalitarian propaganda."

"Ah!" said Hartnell, understandingly. "Still, I don't see what we can do about obliging him without proper equipment."

"Shows they're as primitive as we thought, doesn't it?" asked Tubby. "After all, they had meteorological warfare on Earth centuries ago."

"Probably the Old Ones who built the light machine had it, too. Aiku says there's a rumour about other hurricanes—generations ago."

"The best thing you can do, Pop," went on Hartnell, "is say we'll quieten the storm for him—but we've got to do it in

the fresh air. At least, that'll get us out of this ghastly place."

"Make it the roof," said Tubby, eagerly. "Perhaps the distress-signal will work there—away from walls. Why, we might even be able to speak to the ship again."

I wished he hadn't suggested such a bright idea at that particular moment. Thung's revolting personality surged through the Mattus machine again, crowing in triumph. His mind, attuned to watchfulness for trickery and manoeuvre, had detected my approval of this scheme.

"Now shall you surely die, O Creatures from the Ship! How can your puny brains in their tiny carapaces hope to defy the might of Thung? This I tell you—first will you ease the air from its torment. After that there shall be ceremonial executions. Then will I take my army and destroy your ship."

The Mattus rod twitched suddenly, as though flung away contemptuously to emphasise these last words, and my mind positively throbbed with relief. Sardonicly, I wished Thung luck in any expedition against the space-ship. The controller could quite reasonably presume our deaths, leaving himself free to adopt defensive measures. One speed-gamma battery might take five seconds to dispose of the Holon emperor and his entire rabble—it would certainly need no longer.

"Very comforting for us—I don't think," said Tubby, after hearing what the future held. "Those black knives give me the shudders."

Our guards turned suddenly to the left, hauling us into single file and Aiku came through again. "We are being taken to the great square beyond the palace. There you will be allowed a little time in which to abate the hurricane. Failure means death."

"And if we succeed?"

"Death all the same, but perhaps a little more pleasantly—and much more quickly."

"Why do they bring you with us?"

He had been ordered, apparently, to act as interpreter. Later there would be a "grand occasion," with four victims, in the Hall of Homage.

"Well, Pop," said Hartnell. "Get busy thinking with what Thung so flatteringly described as your puny brain."

However complicated life becomes, the sheer, bare essentials remain. Throw aside all trimmings and elaborations of strategy—concerning which the theorists can fill volumes—and in our present plight we were left with one straightforward, fundamental line of action. We needed respite from the Holons' attentions; afterwards we might observe means of escape.

I asked Aiku to tell guards we could reduce the storm's violence only by going to a high roof-top.

"Then it is really you, O Men of Earth, who cause the hurricane to blow." His mind conveyed reverent astonishment at the extent of our powers.

"No."

His quick change to bewilderment echoed strongly through the Mattus machine. "But you said that by reaching a roof——"

"That is what you must tell the guards."

"But it would not be true!"

I groaned. Hartnell heard me over the inter-com microphone and started asking questions. "Our friend Aiku, the simple old soul, doesn't understand deception—and I haven't got time to teach him right now."

The Shakkie leader, meantime, was trying to argue matters out for himself. "Either a statement is true—or it is not true. If one says that which is true, the gift of communication

between men fulfils a purpose and is justified. If one speaks something which is not true no purpose can be fulfilled, for knowledge is not propagated——”

We were being hustled along at a rapid pace. I felt my arms slowly numbing from the grip of those tentacles.

“Aiku!” I concentrated full power upon the task of argumentative persuasion. “Will you agree that in some things we are wiser than you?”

“Your knowledge is greater—your practical knowledge,” he conceded cautiously.

“If you act as we say—without questioning the reason—all our lives may be saved.”

“That is impossible——”

Ahead of us and to the side I caught quick whispers of Holons moving apart to allow us passage. I wondered if, having begun celebrations to mark our execution, they might become annoyed at seeing their prey escorted away, but apparently regimentation and discipline were too strong to allow any obvious sign of dissatisfaction. Or maybe they were pleased at the prospect of prolonging our agony.

“Make your decision, Aiku. Will you interpret truly to the guards what we say?”

A brief pause. “Very well. I do not understand—but I will obey.”

Our first manoeuvre was quickly foiled. Aiku said that strict orders had been given forbidding any operations above ground level. For the third time I cursed Thung’s opportunity of eavesdropping upon Tubby’s suggestion.

A little farther on I became aware of a strong wind still blowing gustily. The gale could be heard all the time, rising and falling in sound as it whistled through Kor’s tall black buildings, but until now our atmosphere suits had shielded us from draughts rushing into the doorless palace. Now, however, the disturbance was sufficiently strong for us to feel

the intermittent pressure. We must be nearing the open air.

Although remaining in pitch blackness, we well knew when we stepped into the great square. The hurricane struck with almost physical force, making our line of prisoners and guards weave in serpentine fashion as all strove to maintain their balance.

Aiku's distress flashed clearly along the whipping Mattus rod—and in that moment I realised with leaping heart how those tearing blasts of wind might prove our salvation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ESCAPE

A GAINST the powerful gusts, positions of captors and captured became dramatically reversed. It was three human beings whose firmer and more practised grip upon the ground in such conditions helped maintain the Holons upright.

I wondered why I hadn't thought about it earlier. Judging by their reactions, both Holons and Shakkies lived almost always in an atmosphere of dead calm. Their stalks of tentacles, while quite strong, could never hold top-heavy carapaces upright against a stiff breeze—and the present storm was rather more than that!

Tuning in to Aiku, I received a picture of them pushing out two or three tentacles in the appropriate position to shore themselves up against the wind. Then the gust suddenly exhausted itself and they almost toppled in the opposite direction before they could re-arrange their supports.

After struggling for less than half-a-minute, the guards decided to battle no longer against the hurricane. The only safe position for them was at ground level, and it was there they slumped, not relaxing their grip upon us and nearly ripping our arms from their sockets. For one dreadful moment I feared my suit had been punctured.

"Aiku!" I called. "Aiku! Tell the Holons to release us! Otherwise we can do nothing!"

Holding my breath, I wondered whether they would take any notice. Then, almost reluctantly, the tentacles slipped away and we were free, fighting individually to maintain a footing against the blasts.

"What are we going to do, Pop?" asked Hartnell.

I inquired of Aiku whether he could see any Holons in the big courtyard, apart from the guards.

"They shelter in the palace from this terrible storm. Some have grouped themselves in the doorway, but they dare not come out."

"This looks like our chance," I told the others. "They'll never manage to follow us. Sitting down, as it were, they only move a mile an hour."

"Which way?" asked Tubby. "Perhaps there's only one entrance."

"There must be," I said, "or they'd never have sent the guards with us."

"The tunnels!" yelled Hartnell, with sudden inspiration. "They know we want to reach the roofs—so let's surprise 'em and head the other way."

"We'll have to take Aiku," I said.

"Of course. He'll be able to spot any other tortoises in the dark and he might know enough to guide us."

Through our Shakkie interpreter we pretended Aiku's help was necessary to hold apparatus and that therefore they must release him, too.

"What apparatus?" asked Tubby.

"You're getting as bad as Aiku with unnecessary questions," said Hartnell. "Imaginary apparatus, of course."

"It all depends," I told them, "whether my guess about another way out was right."

Fortunately, it had been a lucky deduction. On the left of the courtyard from where we stood another open doorway

apparently gave access to corridors through which the food-growing tunnels might be reached.

Curiously—for I had not thought much about it until now—I asked Aiku how his agents secured such accurate knowledge of Kor's lay-out.

"Our spies are brave men. A pity their lives are so short and their numbers so few. But we also have other methods. Sometimes, when their hatred grows warmer, the Holons send expeditions to exterminate us. Then we hide ourselves deep in the caves and close the secret paths with great stones. Often one or two Holons become lost. We find them and feed them, because we bear no ill-will. We question them and in their terror they answer truthfully." He emitted a mental sigh. "Always, though, they die—from terror, I think, fearing they will be treated as they treat Shakkies."

Arrangements for our little pantomime were quickly made. Fighting all the time against that violent wind, we clustered together in a huddle, gesticulating and pretending to carry out elaborate calculations. From time to time it seemed as though the hurricane pulled us apart from one another. Aiku, of course, as the Holons by now understood, was particularly vulnerable and frequently became carried nearly a dozen yards before we could grasp a tentacle to pull him towards us again. Nor was it in every instance entirely make-believe.

And all the time he gradually led us nearer the open, waiting doorway.

When I gave the signal—and I did so pretty quickly, haunted always by fear of Holons becoming suspicious—we set off in a final, desperate dash, Aiku leading with a grip on my wrist, myself hanging on to Tubby's hand and Hartnell bringing up the rear.

As soon as we started—an interlocked line of beings flailing and beating against that punishing wind—the alarm evidently sounded. Aiku told me he could hear confused shouting.

"Impossible!" The thought came, automatically and unbidden, but almost in the same instant I realised that the

Shakkie was untroubled by the howlings, shriekings and roarings with which our own ears were bombarded.

Thus it was all the more remarkable that complete panic had not been spread among creatures experiencing for the first time such buffetings from an unheard, unseen element.

Without my support and assistance Aiku would never have kept his heavy body in balance sufficiently long to reach the doorway. Fighting my own battle in addition, I was almost exhausted by the time we left the courtyard and obtained respite from the storm. Pounding headlong through pitch blackness, able to tell only by echoing footsteps and welcome shelter that we were not still in the open, we hurled ourselves onwards in sheer desperation.

"One thing," panted Hartnell, "Thung's little friends won't find it easy to come after us. They'll be whisked away like balloons before they get across the square."

"That's the trouble," said Tubby. "They're likely to spread the alarm and pop out somewhere in front of us."

Another of the corrugated ramps dropped away beneath our feet, sending us slithering and sliding to the bottom. Round corners to right and left, then a further short ramp and we were running through yet another gigantic, empty hall.

After one particularly severe bump on a light-metal corner, Hartnell said, "For Alpha's sake switch on a torch, Pop! It doesn't give much light, but it's better than nothing."

"What if it touched Aiku?"

I could picture him biting his lip with vexation. I could imagine, also, our plight if bereft of our guide because he had stumbled into that fatal pink beam. What chance should we stand—lost in those vast, dark buildings, with their mazes of interlocking corridors and ramps? Even if Holons failed to come upon us, we must surely perish by lack of oxygen when our supplies ran out.

"He'll have to keep clear, that's all! One of us might crack a helmet open——"

On the point of emphasising our dangers, I felt myself unexpectedly pulled to the left as Aiku swerved. My shoulder hit a corner of the wall with an audible crack, sending a sickening jab of pain into my arm despite the protection of the thick suit.

I changed my mind and decided to use the torch. Young Hartnell, guessing the reason, chuckled unfeelingly.

No sign of pursuit yet obtruded itself. Slackening our pace, giving myself a chance to use the Mattus rod again, I told Aiku how we had accidentally discovered the beryllium torch's lethal properties. I showed him the instrument in my other hand and sensed his immediate interest.

"Yet you did not use this weapon to protect yourselves from the Holons, any more than the other means of killing you described to me near our cave when promising protection if I led you to Kor."

Why go into a lot of ponderous and probably half-understood details about Inter-X regulations? "That is not our way," I said. "Unnecessary slaughter is only for barbarians."

His approbation was both dignified and obvious. "Well spoken, O Men of Earth. But if this strange quality you call 'light'—although it is not the same light we know here on Krellig—can make your progress faster, is there reason why it should not be used? We must haste to the tunnels or——"

I felt once more that black dread which came upon him each time he contemplated falling into Holon clutches, yet thinking that once captured he showed so high a philosophical resignation that physical fear almost vanished.

"Keep well beside me, then," I counselled. "I will direct the torch immediately ahead."

In this way we made considerably easier progress.

"That's a lot better," said Hartnell. "At least we can see where we're going now."

On, on and on we pressed, always descending, until at last with almost dramatic suddenness we passed from the area of smooth, plated walls to uneven rock tunnels.

"Ground level at last!" said Tubby, thankfully. "That courtyard place must have been high enough to be old Thung's penthouse."

Still the path led downwards, through a bewildering labyrinth of shafts along which Aiku, tripping carefully at my elbow, directed us confidently.

"Hey, Pop!" exclaimed Hartnell, suddenly. "Doesn't it strike you as funny that our pet tortoise knows the way so well? Anybody might think he'd been here before." He broke off, struck by a horrible suspicion. "You don't think he's—selling us to the Holons? As price of his own safety, maybe?"

"No, I don't!" I said, firmly. "I'd have known through the Mattus machine."

"Don't under-rate 'em, Pop!"

The explanation was both simple and reassuring. Beyond power of our poor human eyes to see, Holon tentacles had beaten a path on the rock during countless food-collecting journeys to the catacombs. This trail Aiku was following, confident that domestic labours would have been suspended during barbarous ceremonials in the Hall of Homage.

Was it merely young Hartnell's insinuations—or did I detect a certain slyness of hidden purpose in the Shakkie's mind?

For another half-hour we struck deeper and deeper, first passing isolated clumps of fungi sprouting on the walls, finally tearing our way through great, obscene tangles looped and festooned in such luxurious growth that the tunnel was almost completely obstructed.

Here and there large bays opened from the shaft and these, too, were filled with pale masses shining pinkly in my torch beam. I noted idly that there seemed to be one distinct species only.

At last Aiku announced we were temporarily safe. "The food hereabouts, although of excellent quality and quite fit for eating, is not yet fully ripe." Had he been speaking, his voice would have assumed a wistful tone. "In Shakkie caves crops are small and we must often harvest them too early in order to sustain our people. Here in Kor food is plentiful and the Holons can wait to enjoy it more adequately. Therefore no collectors are likely to visit these parts of the tunnels until later."

Although I could not see his actions, of course, impressions through the Mattus machine left no doubt that he was tearing lumps of fungus from the walls and eating them. The resultant thought-impulse—summed up in one word, "Delicious!"—made me realise that I, too, was hungry.

"Where do we go from here?" asked Hartnell.

"If nobody's likely to find us," I said, "we might as well rest. Old Aiku's feeding his face with what he says is very tasty fungus. I suppose we could keep him company with a couple of Bridgeman tablets."

"It'll probably break Aiku's heart," said Tubby, "but I'm using some of his dinner for a cushion. Very comfortable, too."

Hartnell and I did likewise, enjoying our easiest moment of the trip. We sat with our backs against the tunnel walls and leisurely gulped our refreshment.

If ever I get the time, I'm determined to invent a concentrated food tablet coated with a tonic for the taste-buds. Headquarters are always very insistent upon the nutritive value of Dr. Bridgeman's pills; no doubt they are right. But one gelatine-covered capsule is exactly as insipid as the next.

and choice of flavours would do as much for morale as vitamoid-protein content does for physical needs.

Thinking on such things, I opened my mouth and groped idly for the press-button, forgetting the Mark VI adaptation on the suit. Changes had been officially adopted since Bill Clayton's unfortunate experience with Bridgeman Feeder Unit Mark V, which had somehow gone haywire and pumped a whole magazine of tablets down his throat in a split-second. The official maximum in any eight hours is two.

Bill Clayton, geologist with an expedition on Zenna at the time, had been rushed back to the ship's hospital. It was too late. Bill always had good metabolism and the tablets were absorbed. He gained eight pounds every day for a fortnight and looked like a balloon. In spite of all they could do it took six months of semi-starvation to restore his normal size.

Anyway, I fiddled with the control belt, gulped my meal and lay back to rest. Next instant the tunnel swayed violently sideways, seeming to pause for a moment before thudding shudderingly to its original position. Had it not been for the cushioning fungi we must certainly have been badly bruised, if no worse. Simultaneously a shattering roar burst upon our ears with such force that we were momentarily dazed by beating waves of sound. For fully twenty seconds it re-echoed and boomed through the catacombs in frightening fashion.

"Earthquake?" asked Hartnell, gasping.

"Let's get out of here!" said Tubby, hastily. "I can think of better places in earthquakes than a hole a couple of hundred feet below the ground."

Tuning-in to Aiku, I discovered the old Shakkie not nearly so alarmed as I had imagined. The reason, apparently, was a precedent. "Many years before," he said, "the earth trembled in silence——"

One mould manufactures sheets measuring about thirty yards by fifteen yards; another, pieces approximately six feet by four feet; the third produces sections of corrugated ramp whereby one may step down from higher levels. Many hundreds of thousands of such pieces have together constructed Kor. The material is not worked in any way at all. When a piece in the mould has reached its proper thickness, the machine shuts itself off automatically until the section is removed. So that men may carry away the piece in safety, fifteen minutes elapse after the mould is emptied. Then this wonderful machine commences of its own accord to manufacture a further identical piece."

I could understand that the Holons—or anyone else, for that matter—might find it rather awkward if they stepped into focus while light-material continued to be formed. They had their own natural shells, of course; an additional plating of heavy, inflexible light-material would prove no joke. My respect for the Old Ones' ingenuity increased, especially their ability to construct a unique machine capable of functioning perfectly with unskilled labour after lying idle for uncounted centuries.

"But Kor's great buildings mean that the sections must be fitted together with enormous strength, otherwise stresses would cause collapse."

To my amazement, although I had previously admitted Aiku's theoretical knowledge, I received quite a neat little elementary lecture about electrical potentials and directed a mental bow towards Hartnell for his speculation concerning the way light-ions were held in place to form the fabric for Kor.

As a result of the way molecules were built up, pieces came from the light-machine moulds with distinct "magnetic" values. The same forces which held together individual ions and also gripped stray electrons, such as the yellow and blue elements from our beryllium torch rays, lent potential to

the pieces themselves—positive at one pole, negative at the other.

By age-old principles "like repels like" and "opposite attracts opposite." Placed suitably in position, even the large-sized slabs exerted potential sufficient to hold themselves upright and after a comparatively short period of time became self-welded. To all intents and purposes, therefore, each of Kor's buildings composed itself into a solid entity—far more so than was possible by any other means of construction.

It was a feat which frankly took my breath away. Furthermore, it explained why the vast, black halls of Kor contained no furnishing and decoration. Except for routine light-mould sections, the Holons possessed no more equipment or material than the Shakkies.

"The knives," I said, my mind running in a rather morbid groove. "If the Holons possess only three moulds how can the knives be manufactured?"

"Remember I told you that the machine, after eight hours' work, takes its eight-hour rest. Occasionally the period of leisure begins after only a very small layer of material has accumulated. If this be removed—and it is so thin that viewed edgewise a piece can hardly be seen—the sheet breaks when dashed violently against a rock and suitable fragments picked out. Because of their thinness the pieces are incredibly sharp and need to be scraped against another section of light-material for a long time before one end becomes sufficiently blunted to form a safe grip."

"But surely with instruments like these—so intensely hard—the Holons could carve stone? They might at least saw boulders into flat-planed geometrical figures to use as decorations, even if they didn't serve any practical purpose."

It was as though Aiku shook his head sadly. "Thung's people have no tradition of art or culture. All energies are devoted to one aim—continually building Kor larger and higher, piling one great, empty building upon another. There

the towers stand—reaching their black fingers to the sky—monuments to a nation's useless endeavour at the behest of an evil autocrat."

Altogether it was a fine flow of "oratory" and I didn't hesitate to assume quite a deal of credit for my translation work as I mentally recounted those rolling, sonorous sentences. Yet it was certainly no lighthearted matter and the more I thought about it the sicker I felt. This sensation of disgust, the nervous strain and physical exertion took their toll and with a brief explanation to Aiku I leaned back against the springy fungi and went to sleep.

When I woke, little more than three hours later, to the continued pitch-black darkness of the tunnels, Aiku had gone. So had my beryllium torch.

I thought for a moment that the earthquake was recurring with quick, thudding, rhythmic jolts, but it was only the beating of my heart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ON THE TRAIL OF AIKU

"WELL," said young Hartnell, brightly, "we don't know how long he's been gone, but he's certainly had time to reach Thung's place. He's probably slaughtering Holons right and left. If only we had tortoises ears we might find that the row's reaching us right down here."

"And I wouldn't grudge him a single moment of his fun," agreed Tubby. "In fact, I'd like to lend him a hand."

I drew a deep breath. "It's all very well to try and cheer me up—but this is serious! When the controller hears what's happened I'll be suspended for investigation. And remember what happened to Gustav Crochet!"

"Good old Pop! Always looking on the bright side." By his tone of voice I guessed how broadly he was grinning. For my part I felt more like weeping. "We'll be lucky if we ever get within spitting distance of the ship again. Before the controller can have your blood we've got to find a way out of these tunnels. Any ideas?"

We moved carefully back the way we had come, Hartnell and Tubby shining before them the dim, pink beams of our two remaining torches. Broken fungus fell upon us in moist, heavy tangles now that Aiku's bulk no longer smashed a broad path. Underfoot, growths loosened from the walls during our previous journey squirmed almost as though alive.

Nevertheless, slipping and sliding as we went, we blessed those thick, tubular clumps of wormlike vegetation, for they blazed a path towards the surface. Knowing that our route must always lie in an upwards direction provided a further clue, although this was not much help once we left the fungus area and vainly tried to detect beaten paths which Aiku declared had been made by Holon food-carriers. Rises in the tunnel floors were so slight and the labyrinth so bewildering that several times we strayed into blind alleys.

It was in the fourth or fifth of these that Hartnell stopped, studying the blank wall of rock despairingly. "This is nothing short of a nightmare, Pop."

The sudden thunder of another earthquake shock underlined his words. We waited miserably, without speaking, until the sound died into sullen mutterings.

"Let's try again," I said. "I'm sure that previous shaft was some sort of main thoroughfare."

"Any particular reason for thinking so, Pop? Or are you only trying to keep up our morale?"

"Just a feeling—a sort of—er—well—a hunch, if you like."

Hartnell guffawed hugely. "Remember what you told me about hunches? Throwbacks, atavism, outdated superstitions——"

I grinned. "I'll take back every word—when we know I'm right."

"If you're correct about this, Pop, I'll be so relieved I won't ask you to."

Tubby announced that he had a brainwave. "I'm going to put full power on my outside microphone again. Unless we're so far down it makes no difference I ought to be able to hear the hurricane. That'll tell us which way to take."

"You young fool!" I exclaimed. "Another quake shock would blast the eardrums right out of your head!"

"Better two live men and one deaf—rather than all three dead!"

"Wait till we've tried the other tunnel, anyway."

Resuming cautious plodding through the catacombs, we caught a momentary glimpse of something which made us freeze in our tracks. Involuntary reflexes snapped unthinkingly into action, making Hartnell and Tubby immediately switch off their torches. The subdued pink beams had revealed unmistakeable outlines of a Holon carapace squatting obscenely in our path.

Amid the darkness I held myself stiff as a ram-rod, wondering what might happen next.

Then Hartnell chuckled. "Might as well switch on again. Any harm's been done by now."

The Holon was undoubtedly dead. It was the first time we been able to examine one at leisure and we heaved the big shell over sideways, finding all our strength necessary. The weight must have been well over 250 lbs. Ribbed rows of gills on the under-flesh were already decomposing and black, watery fluid ran away in steady trickles. The tentacles that had so easily supported the shell's considerable weight now lay flaccid.

"Grieving galaxies!" exclaimed Hartnell. "How I detest these sticky anatomical jobs!"

"Me, too," I said. "That's why I'm a botanist. Anyway, headquarters will have something to say if we ignore routine instructions."

So we went quickly to work while the nightmarish aspect of our situation assumed even greater proportions. Tubby stood at one side photographing proceedings with his infrared cameras while Hartnell and myself dissected the dead Holon in that dim, pinkish light and placed small sections in our specimen cases.

During the distasteful task of clawing aside handfuls of

sticky, clotted material I mentioned a possibility which had entered my mind earlier. "Decomposition," I said.

"Too true!" answered Hartnell. "This old tortoise might almost have been hit with a speed-gamma."

"Exactly! And doesn't it strike you as setting in very quickly?"

He straightened his back and tried to peer through the helmet-visor at my face. "You mean——?"

"Our light only fell on him a couple of minutes ago. But suppose he'd been killed more than two hours earlier?"

"Ah!" said Tubby. "When Aiku passed this way?"

"Now that's very interesting indeed," admitted Hartnell, thoughtfully, "and it seems to show we're on the right road at last."

"Come on," I said. "Help me shove these foul remains where they won't be noticed easily in case any of his friends come along. Then we'd better be moving."

The winding path led upwards, ever upwards, and with each step our hearts grew equally lighter for the way broadened remarkably until at last we could almost walk abreast. At intervals between subterranean rumblings came again the faint wailing of the wind. Before long, gingerly turning up outside microphones, we heard breezes whisper noticeably against our helmets.

Then, unbelievably, our feet trod upon smooth, hard light-material. We were back on the surface. Before us lay the problem of surmounting a further escape barrier—finding a route that passed beyond the walls of Kor, through pitch blackness where watchful Holons lurked, seeing but unseen.

"If only these confounded compasses would work," I said, with futile exasperation. "Or if the distress signal would pass through these horrible black buildings——"

"Don't be so despondent, Pop," said Hartnell. "I can think of several ways out."

"Name one!" I snapped, disbelievingly.

"Kidnap a Holon!" he said, blandly. "Put the fear of Sirius into him through the Mattus machine and force him to guide us to the outside walls."

"Having looked into a couple of Holon minds already," I said, "the betting is they'd put the fear of Sirius into *me*."

Resilient youth was ready with a further suggestion. "Then try promises. What's a good way of interesting 'em?"

"They don't seem to bother about anything at all," said Tubby, "Except killing Shakkies and building empty sky-scrapers."

"That's it! Tell 'em we'll build Kor twice as large and three times as handsome—if only they'll let us visit the ship."

I pondered on this for several seconds. "And suppose Thung's eventually accepted—rightly or wrongly—as the official government of Krellig? What will headquarters say when he demands his price? There's a long sub-section at the back of the Inter-X book about unauthorised political bribery."

"You and your book!" said Hartnell, disgustedly. "I'm more concerned with getting out of here."

"The sooner we start," said Tubby, wisely, "the less likely they are to get on our trail."

Deciding that at any rate our first objective must be the open air, we tried to follow the sound of the wind. Not only would this bring us to the streets, where we would stand a better chance of meeting any rescue expedition from the space-ship, but pursuing Holons might be too busy trying to stand up against the hurricane to lay tentacles on us.

Indeed, through those dark corridors and vast, deserted halls I felt shivers chase along my spine and the hair prickle on my neck at the thought that any second could bring a python's grip. Our only slender hope in that unholy blackness was the Mattus rod, which I held before me, straining to detect any mental impression of hostility that might betray a Holon presence.

And then, far towards the end of a long passage we were traversing, the darkness became broken by a faint, elongated patch of pink light, followed a second later by the thud of some heavy body hitting the floor.

"Shut off the torches!" I cried. "It's Aiku! He's just killed another of 'em."

"Good old Aiku!" said Hartnell, approvingly. "He'll know the way out."

But the basic, universal principles of right and wrong—and it is astounding upon how many planets they are accepted by creatures of high intellectual development—proved too strong for the Shakkie leader's tender conscience. Instead of rejoining us he fled, while we waited in blind expectancy.

When at last the truth dawned upon us we set off in pursuit, Hartnell continually muttering a lot of profane expressions picked up in various Z-bars.

The second Holon was dead—and quite fresh.

"Now your mind can be easier, Pop," said Tubby, consolingly. "We haven't done anything to transgress the rules. This is No. 2 for Aiku."

"If only we knew which way he's gone——"

"Follow the trail of dead Holons," suggested Hartnell, callously. "Humped milestones along the path to freedom."

But we discovered no more corpses for the present and fell back on our original plan. Winds blew more and more strongly along draughty corridors and through empty, echoing halls until at last the gale tore upon us in full force. Flattened against a wall for shelter, we knew that at length we were free of enclosing structures and had emerged either into a street or courtyard. As we stood there, awaiting a pause between gusts before groping our way round the buildings, the unbelievable happened! A tiny spark of light—white light shone for an instant low in the sky. Then it was gone.

I heard Hartnell gasp and knew that he had seen it, too. "Do you think it was a signal from the ship?" he asked, eagerly.

"Don't see what else it could be."

"Throw away the compasses, Pop!" laughed Tubby, excitedly. "We've got our direction-fix now."

More cheerfully, we hit a wide thoroughfare leading approximately to the point where the spark of light had shone, pressing on as steadily as we could while the hurricane alternately lifted us forward and then did its best to blow us back again. But despite such buffetings we were leaving Kor! Aiku's information that practically all Holons were gathered in the palace for Thung's foul ceremonials gave reason to believe that risk of interception was very slight, particularly while the storm raged so violently.

After twenty minutes we were breathing quickly but not particularly distressed. The street apparently continued endlessly.

"Anyone remember how long it took us to reach Thung's hide-out when they brought us in?" asked Hartnell.

"I was too busy to notice," I said. "Besides, this confounded wind wasn't blowing then. Bound to take longer this time."

Again we proceeded to make what headway we could. The wind continually shrieked and wailed across high roof-tops, plucking at our suits with invisible fingers and sometimes pressing us bodily backwards as if with a giant hand. It became evident that the going grew tougher minute by minute.

"Let's stop for a little while," I gasped. "Probably we can find shelter near one of the buildings."

Their replies showed my compainons, although younger, to be in no less need of respite.

"Phew!" said Tubby, gasping in more oxygen. "I certainly don't like this storm!"

Another dull, reverberating rumble shook the city's very foundations. We felt the earth heave and tremble beneath our feet.

"I like earthquakes even less!" declared Hartnell.

We lolled against a wall, staring sightlessly into the black sky. "Why don't they have the sense to fire another signal?"

Suddenly, to our right, more brilliant pin-points of light shone overhead, casting a hazy glow against which the towers of Kor could be plainly seen for a full two seconds.

"It's in the other direction!" wailed Hartnell, despairingly.

"What in Betelguese do they think they're doing?" demanded Tubby.

Realisation of the truth brought nausea hot and bitter to my throat with disappointment. There were no rocket-signals. Ripped by fierce winds, the greenish-blue cloud layers, invisible since darkness fell, had parted temporarily in places, allowing starlight to fall upon Kor.

And I could have kicked myself, too, for this very phenomenon formed part of an alarming theory I had evolved to explain a number of happenings on Krellig.

I looked at my luminous, multi-dialled watch. "Come on!" I exclaimed, hoarsely. "We've got to be clear of Kor in seven hours—if we want to stay alive."

"You mean the Holons? But why seven hours?"

"Not the Holons! Something worse!"

"But which way do we go?" demanded Tubby, shrilly.

"Does it matter? Provided we travel in a straight path we're bound to reach the city walls."

Wearily we resumed our journey and, although I could ill spare breath for talking, explanation of urgent action could not be avoided.

"Think what we've learned already," I said. "A planet completely enclosed by vapours which absorb all red from

the spectrum of its sun—a race of highly-civilized creatures who invented a machine to solidify that yellow-and-blue light before blasting themselves off the face of the globe—their descendants using this machine to build a useless, empty city. Think, too, of the legends both Aiku and Thung have mentioned—how at some far distant date in the past the air moaned and the earth trembled, just as it does now. Then remember why we've been sent here—'to observe approach of extra-galactical body, etc.' What happens when a couple of planets or stars approach one another closely?"

Hartnell's wordless exclamation of fury showed he had at last grasped the point.

"Exactly! Gravitational pull affects the atmosphere, the oceans and finally the solid portions of both. Krellig may not possess any sea but its atmosphere's certainly being worked on nicely and the earthquakes are beginning. Every indication shows that this confounded asteroid moves in an elliptical orbit—as, indeed, we suspected—and comes near Krellig every thousand years or so."

"You don't think," said Tubby, in a hushed whisper, "Old Growler might have been damaged or trapped in a quake fissure?"

"I hope they've got more sense than to wait for that," said Hartnell. "More likely they'll take her safely in the air and leave us here."

They wrangled quite vigorously about the stupidity and heartlessness of controllers, ignoring in the heat of argument the vital point towards which I was leading. We had found the light-metal practically indestructible. Our improvised method of punching a hole through the wall, while no doubt very praiseworthy and ingenious, inflicted no real damage. Had the Holons not fetched us out we might even now have been still engaged in trying to cut away a portion of our cell sufficiently large to escape.

But the Old Ones must have used considerable quantities of light-material when building their civilisation. Why had

we found no trace of it? It would have been impossible to confuse such work with the Holons' clumsy, box-like construction.

But we had proved what happened when the material was subjected to red light. Was not light from the approaching asteroid a definite red? And with clouds shredded to tatters by the hurricane could not such light shine through?

My imagination reeled in trying to picture that scene when the Old Ones' gigantic palaces—scorched of all life during heat-ray battles, emptier even than the Holon sheds—disappeared in monstrous clouds of corruscating, scintillating light. (Probably some astronomer, watching at a distant point of the universe, prided himself on spotting a nova.) And meanwhile a few miserable Shakkies, cowering deep in their hillside caves, knew nothing of what was occurring outside save the shaking of the ground and the air's weird moaning. They survived to transmit legends to their descendants.

If we had believed it impossible for the hurricane to blow harder we were mistaken, and by some quirk of fate the wind set dead against us. Wearily, our aching legs slowed to a standstill and we dropped in sitting positions against a convenient wall. Starlight appeared fitfully but showed us nothing save vast expanses of monotonous black buildings silhouetted against the sky.

Hartnell's words dropped one by one into a pool of utter exhaustion. "I don't—mind—admitting—I can't—go on—any longer."

"We're trying to do too much," I said, in little better shape. "If it wasn't for this storm——"

All advances of science, it seems, suffer drawbacks. A thing like a gravity adjuster, for instance—a marvellous invention only perfected comparatively recently. Turn the control knob to right or left and the box-like apparatus strapped to your shoulder blades will increase or decrease weight sufficiently to suit requirements. The inventors, apparently, didn't allow for hurricanes. Lighten the load to make your

step easier and you find yourself blown away; increase the weight to anchor yourself down and each step becomes correspondingly heavier.

"Let's rest here a few minutes," said Tubby. "Maybe the wind'll ease soon. It can't go on blowing like this for ever."

"It doesn't need to," I said grimly. "Another seven hours should be enough."

Howling upon a higher note of derision, the storm continued to increase in ferocity. Wind plucked more vigorously at my suit—so persistently, indeed, that the dragging sensation seemed too strong to be attributed to mere air, however violently propelled.

In that supposition I was correct. When I tried to escape some of the blast by crawling deeper into an angle between two walls, strong bands fastened themselves upon my arms.

Cries of alarm from Hartnell and Tubby showed that they, too, found themselves restrained. We were once more in the power of the Holons.

CHAPTER NINE

THE HALL OF CURIOSITIES

ONCE more we stood before Thung's throne in the great Hall of Homage. Holon tentacles whispered by thousands in sinister susurrations around us and a sense of expectancy saturated the atmosphere. Everything indicated a grand finale scene before the last, unpleasant curtain.

I heard Hartnell draw a deep breath of resignation. "Well," he said, "this looks like the end. Here we are, with speed-gammas ready, and it's against the rules to use 'em! If anybody gets away from here and back to the ship, tell 'em I died like a law-abiding little space-man!"

"This suspense is killing me prematurely," complained Tubby. "Switch on, Pop, and tell us what they're up to."

The Holons had gone into their weaving, bobbing ritual dance again. I knew that the moment the Mattus started to operate. The same cruel, horrible rhythm surged into my mind with almost hypnotic effect, but as I felt my reason surrendering to its spell—like a rabbit falling deeper under the fascination of a cobra's swaying head—sanity suddenly returned.

Feeling almost as though some familiar voice had wakened me from a doze, I recognised Aiku's presence. He was a very repentant Shakkie, too, as he stood beside us again in the guards' grip, not only for stealing my torch but because of the Holons he had killed. Subdued by his conscience and

imminence of death, he was frightened, resigned and dignified at the same time.

"I blame myself for weakness, O Men of Earth," he told me, apologetically. "My mistake was in trying to hasten the march of events. Perhaps it is not destined for Thung's regime to end during my generation. That I have tried and failed makes it certainly so. The years will no doubt bring some worthier instrument to rid the world of evil."

"You hoped to kill Thung with my torch?"

"That was my intention. Shame upon me that in my rage and determination I ended the lives of two Holons who crossed my path. I bore no grudge against them individually. It was in self-defence that I slew them——"

"The age-old excuse," I thought, privately.

"——But they should not have tried to deflect me from my purpose. The Holons were too many and too cunning for me to succeed single-handed, though. I was seized from behind and brought here. Your death-torch now rests in Thung's hands. He is examining it——"

I felt the Mattus rod bend against a sudden grasp and the Holon emperor's masterful thoughts blotted out Aiku's tale of woe. His great, evil voice seemed to boom through my aching head. "At last you have tasted the power of invincible Thung!" roared those hate-filled tones. I could have sworn he snarled in vindictive satisfaction. "Not for long were you and the traitor Aiku beyond our observation. While you fought against the moaning air in our streets—and we know now that your puny powers did not bring the hurricane, as you falsely boasted, for you also were distressed by it—Holon eyes watched from the mighty towers of Kor."

This slap in the face about starting the storm, of course, was sheer, unadulterated impudence, for it was Thung himself who had blamed us all along—as he well knew.

"Now are you come before me in judgment——"

With an enormous effort of will that sent sweat streaming down my forehead I broke defiantly into his tirade. "The shaking earth and the new stars in the sky—did we pretend to manifest these, also?"

"Stars?"

I had him baffled for a moment. Holon "radar" eyes must necessarily know how vapour clouds had been rent by the hurricane, yet while we could see light-waves from twinkling specks in the galaxy beyond, their viewing apparatus—even if sufficiently sensitive—must wait years for ether-echoes to reach the objective and return. In our case the visible light had already been eons upon its journey and was present for us to observe.

And so in my mental "close-up" of a star I emphasised its vast bulk, immense heat and terrific gravitational force, doing my best to make the whole thing seem as terrifying as possible. Having gripped his attention, I threw in a string of powerful thought-impulses about space-flying, the power of gamma batteries and resources of the many worlds which could combine with us to bring vengeance upon him unless he accepted our peaceful intentions and allowed us to depart unharmed.

Unfortunately, I must have overplayed my hand, for I sensed abruptly that he was positively bouncing up and down on his seat with rage. These pocket-dictators invariably react in one of two ways—either they cringe before superior power or are so puffed up with their own importance that they defy it. Their own penchant for empty bluffing leads them to believe others possess similar tendencies.

"Fools! How dare you threaten Thing and his great people? Is not my army the largest ever known? Are they not present in their hundreds, armed and ready to do my bidding? Oh, you shall learn with sorrow the folly of defying my people." He repeated the trick of whipping himself

into frenzied denunciation. "I will send you to death with worst possible humiliation——"

The thought-series broke off in a sudden blankness for which I was entirely unprepared. Momentarily I seemed to drop swiftly through a black, bottomless void, as though the floor had been violently withdrawn from beneath my feet, but mental equilibrium quickly restored itself. The springy Mattus rod, hurled away with violent scorn, whipped and sang.

"What's happening?" demanded Hartnell, in an overwrought whisper. He and Tubby had again been standing with superhuman patience in that murmuring darkness. "For sweet Saggitarius' sake, what's happening?"

"Something pretty grim, I'm afraid. This might be the end——"

"Now you're talking like Aiku!"

"Seriously, young Hartnell." I spoke slowly and sincerely. "If I don't get another chance, I'd like to say it's been grand knowing both of you——"

"And you, Pop," said Tubby. He chuckled. "You're a dry old stick but I wouldn't have wanted to go globe-trotting with anyone better——"

"What else can I say?" asked Hartnell, with suspicious gruffness. Rather too obviously, in hope of covering his emotion, he changed the subject. "Well, let's know the worst."

"Thung's cooking up something thoroughly unpleasant for us. He's going on about preparing humiliation and so forth."

"Oh. He wants to make us crawl, eh?" A pause. "Has he gone all temperamental and shut off communication or is he still blowing off electrons?"

"He's dried up. I'll see if Aiku's got any information."

Once more I called the Shakkie leader, sensing again that mingled fear and resignation. "What does Thung intend to do?"

"He holds the death torch in his tentacles, O Men of Earth. Now he points it towards two men dancing at the left of his throne, he——"

The subdued pink beam shone for a moment dramatically through pitch blackness and we saw for the first time, in a brief, almost unbelievable snapshot, how Holons whirled and teetered in their barbaric dance. Next instant two heavy carapaces clattered spinning in death to the floor, making us catch our breath in horror at such senseless slaughter. Thung had tested the torch upon victims chosen at random from his retinue.

The Mattus rod was grasped so fiercely that I nearly lost my grip and the Holon emperor came through again almost screaming with vindictive triumph.

"This is your sentence! The traitor Aiku, as befits so contemptible a person, shall be hacked to pieces. The three Creatures from Nowhere shall suffer the indignity of execution with their own weapon!" He roared hugely at such an excellent joke. "Behold, you die—now!"

The lamp shone pinkly in my eyes. I slumped to the floor.

"That's what I call presence of mind, Pop," cried Hartnell, with elation. "Lie still—we might get away with it yet."

"One leg's cramped," I said, "and I think I'm going to sneeze."

The light winked again.

"Look out, Pop," said Tubby. "Here I come!"

A moment later Hartnell joined us. "What are we going to do if they start chopping Aiku?"

"What can we do?"

And then there occurred a development I had vaguely dreaded. Something plucked at the Mattus rod—gently this time. Once more Thung's mental fingers probed my brain. Cold perspiration broke out as I vainly tried to make my mind

an utter blank. It was, of course, useless, although Hartnell made crude witticisms later.

"Fool that I am!" I groaned to the others. "I forgot to switch off the Mattus when I fell! I daren't do it afterwards in case he saw me move. Now he knows we're alive."

"Well, keep it switched on," said Hartnell. "It'll be funny to watch his face, so to speak."

Thung's transports of rage, however, were far from humorous. I expected momentarily that orders would go out for Holon light-blades to slice us to ribbons.

We rose to our feet feeling rather sheepish. Aiku seemed suitably amazed, but somehow he viewed my halting, spur-of-the-second explanations with suspicion. I can't say he was altogether unjustified.

There was little time for pondering. The tentacle grasping my Mattus receiver trembled with fury and the flood of blazing thought-impulses that streamed along it made me recoil in terror.

When his paroxysms were spent, Thung said, "So! You imagined I would be misled by your pantomime! Not I—Thung, Emperor of All the Holons! How dare you pit your puny wiles against me? Now shall vengeance truly be taken. You expected my guards to fall upon you with their swords, did you not? Oh, yes, I read your feeble little mind easily! To die quickly is more than you deserve. Here, then, is the sentence that I, Thung, impose upon you—your bodies shall be installed in the Hall of Curiosities, and this traitor, Aiku, shall accompany you."

Across the Holon leader's bellowings I caught a thin, shrill cry of piteous horror. Aiku apparently knew better than we did what the sentence entailed.

Once more we were seized and led from the palace. This time the Holons took no chances when the air hit us outside. Down they went to a crawling position and we were obliged to proceed at a snail's pace, crouching uncomfortably, in the teeth of that howling gale.

"Can't we try to tip 'em over?" asked Hartnell. "If all of us pushed with the wind when the next gust comes——"

"No good," I said, despondently. "Have you forgotten how much these things weigh? More than likely we'd get the arms ripped from our suits."

I looked at the sky, where stars twinkled among shredded vapour drifts. Somewhere, far off, a clatter echoed above the storm, as though at last a slab of light-metal had been loosened to bounce down the roofs from a topmost tower.

Five or six minutes later we were under cover again, although still swung from side to side by a screeching draught through the inky-black sheds, and our guards pulled themselves upright again.

"Where are they taking us?" I asked Aiku. "What's going to happen?"

He was almost paralysed by fear, so that his thoughts dropped out with slow, jerky reluctance like words from between chattering teeth. "The Hall of Curiosities—a place harbouring indescribable objects! We shall be left for a time until we go a little mad because of what we see——"

Mad? Were there, then, circumstances which could break the brain of a Shakkie or Holon?

"——Although not sufficiently insane that we fail to recognise where they take us next—and what they do to us when our lives are slowly extinguished in the great machine."

Shivers tingled like icy, electric prickles down my back. Probably because my mind had been left numb by Thung's harangue, it was Hartnell who, unimpressed after hearing about Aiku's creepy forebodings, placed his fingers upon the crux of the position. "Whatever strange little playmates Thung keeps in this show-place oughtn't to affect us—because while Shakkies may be able to see 'em, we can't."

"But what's he mean by the machine?" asked Tubby. "What machine?"

We were descending the largest ramp so far encountered. Down, down and down, with never a respite, until I realised how fortunate it was that darkness surrounded us, for had our eyes been able to gaze along such an apparently endless, high-roofed shaft we must assuredly have lost balance and fallen headlong. As it was, all three of us stumbled once or twice—each time with a gasp of alarm at the thought of plunging into unimaginable depths—but the Holon's grip was always sure and their multi-tentacled hold upon the corrugated floor never faltered, even when quake shocks rocked the very foundations.

At last we halted and there came the deep, thunderous rumble of immense doors sliding open. We were led a little farther, then the clasp round our biceps relaxed. An almost imperceptible click sounded from the direction of the doors. Could it possibly be a lock? And then we were alone—presumably in the dreadful Hall of Curiosities.

I sensed a little moan from Aiku and I knew he had collapsed to the ground—a heap of quivering jelly inside his shell. “I see them! I see them!” he cried, and screamed mentally in a piercing wail that made me click off the Mattus in sheer self-defence. Had I been obliged to listen for long, Thung's purpose of driving us mad would have been achieved prematurely.

“I gather we're here,” said young Hartnell, coolly. “What now?”

“Aiku's already had a look at something he doesn't like,” I said. “We may as well see what it was.”

“Tell him to stand well back, then, and I'll switch on a torch.”

This brief conversational exchange was self-possessed and light-hearted—what we said after examining a few objects by the subdued pink beam was quite the reverse.

I do not propose to describe them. Indeed, it is remarkable that no possible combination of words from any known

language of the universe could even vaguely describe the fantastic, incredibly-varied shapes which squatted in serried rows one above the other extending to the unbelievably-distant end of that immense underground hall. Where they came from we shall probably never know. Unfortunately, I am certain the mental images of those creatures I inspected will never fade from my memory; moreover, the horror inspired by them remains as fresh as in that awful moment I first laid eyes on them.

During fourteen space-journeys I have seen life in many weird and creepy forms. None filled me at first glance with such frightened loathing and disgust or exuded so unmistakable an aura of evil—not even the Holons. And they were dead—mere museum specimens—as black as the lightless cavern that housed their corpses. Imagination reeled in contemplating their activities or mentalities in times when animated by the living spark.

The objects rested in elaborately-carved niches of light-metal. More than that—they were cunningly arranged to tempt the observer, to lure him on with awful fascination. Repulsiveness had been graded by some high intelligence so that horror receded for a time from exhibit to exhibit, only to return in even fuller measure. Examining the creatures in stunned silence, we broke away after the first score, not daring to continue for fear of what we might find at the far end of the hall.

"They're—they're plated with light-metal!" whispered Hartnell, appalled.

"That's what Thung meant by the machine! We're supposed to be put into it until a deposit collects all over us! Then they'll bring us here to join the other specimens."

"What a prospect!" said Tubby, shuddering.

Fortunately, Hartnell's irrepressible personality came to our rescue in the very moment I felt myself submerging helplessly into a sea of terror. "Wonder if they'll rate us with the

minor horrors," he said, "or with the big fellers down there?"

Aiku still gibbered with fear near the great doors. A burst of pity possessed me upon realising he could not share our protective darkness. "Close your eyes if the sight is unendurable," I suggested, kindly.

"Close my eyes?" It was obvious from his slow reaction that the strain was telling. "What is that?"

In that moment Thung's full devilry—and the fatal mistake he had committed in his bombastic ignorance—was revealed. Tortoise men were incapable of shutting out sights around them. No wonder, in that evil Hall of Curiosities, their reason tottered. But we humans were safe—temporarily at least.

"Look," I told the others, "we can surely do something for him! Get a piece of material to hold in front of his antennæ."

"Poor old boy!" said Tubby. "Here, I'll tear off a piece of my uniform."

He put his hand through the suit's space-lock, jerked and brought out a strip of cloth with which we improvised a clumsy "blindfold" round the Shakkie's throbbing sight-organs.

Once it was affixed I experienced with Aiku through the Mattus rod a warm, healing sensation of ineffable relief. "We have been given our carapaces for protection," he explained. "In case of emergency we may lower ourselves to the ground and withdraw our tentacles to safety—but Nature has seen fit to give us methods of sight we cannot safeguard. It is through the antennæ that the deadly beam from your torch strikes to the brain. Our 'eyes' are always open that we may miss no observation or threatened danger. In some circumstances this advantage proves our undoing."

I voiced a suspicion which had been in my mind since seeing carvings on the museum's light-metal shelves. "This hall is the work of the Old Ones?"

"Not for the awful purpose to which Thung has debased it, of course. This and the light machine are all which remain of our forefathers' scientific headquarters. The things preserved here roamed Krellig in far distant ages——"

No wonder we had shuddered when gazing through that telescope in the space-ship. We must have felt instinctively repelled by any planet capable of spawning such incredibilities. I resolved never again to sneer at premonition.

"With a bit of luck," said Hartnell, "we won't go barmy after all, now we can manage to keep our eyes off those monstrosities. What's the plan of campaign?"

Tubby's torch streaked up and down the doors. They fitted to the nicety of a hair's-breadth. There was no clue to where the locking mechanism might be located. "We'll have to wait till they let us out."

"At least, the light-machine won't start working till morning," I said. "They can't get on with their plating process any earlier than that. I'm more worried about the red asteroid poking its nose over the horizon and shining through the clouds. Kor's going up in a blaze of glory—and we look like going with it!"

"Certainly, everything's been cleaned out by it previously," commented Hartnell. "This place can only have survived because it's so far down." A further thought struck him. "The light-machine escaped, too. Wonder what that's made of."

"Looks like we've got other problems, as well," said Tubby. "Won't the Holons be a bit disappointed when they come back and find we're still sane?"

"We'll have to pretend otherwise."

"Ah, now there's one of your problems, eh?"

"Hm," said Hartnell. "As far as I can see, it's easy for us. But what about Pop—holding the Mattus rod for 'em to peep into his brain box."

I drew myself up in a dignified pose. "Anyone making the obvious remark gets an adverse report in the controller's log." We all laughed and the tension eased considerably. "Seriously, though, something's got to be done about it."

For a moment I imagined the rumbling sound to presage yet another quake shock, but the ground did not quiver. The immense doors were opening.

"Quick!" I said, urgently. "Take Aiku's blindfold off and then stand still. Pretend we're absolutely stiff with terror. Hide your torches, too. It's a wonder they haven't spotted them before."

Should I keep the Mattus switched off? Would Holons suspect deception if the machine gave no response? They might believe my mind to have become literally a blank—no, no, that was absurd! The thought-picture must convey something, at least. Knowing the ways of creatures like Thung made me certain he would arrive in person to gloat over his handiwork. What could I concentrate upon to the exclusion of all else—something weird, inexplicable and bizarre, something beyond all possible Holon understanding? Nerves stretched to excruciating tautness, I strained and sweated in search of inspiration.

I became aware of tortoise men beside me. Unable to see, hear or even smell them, I knew nevertheless that they had arrived. Clicking on the Mattus switch I waited, trembling.

The rod was bent, held for one long, long moment, then released with a gesture of contemptuous satisfaction. It was Thung himself who had done so—of that I had no doubt.

Now-familiar loops of tentacle clasped our upper arms and once more we were led through the darkness, panting with the effort of hauling our bodies along the great ramp.

"I can hear you puffing and blowing, Pop," said Hartnell. "Save your breath. Make 'em half-carry you, like I'm doing."

"If I drag any more I'm afraid my suit will split."

"I've got an itch between my shoulder-blades," complained Tubby, "and I can't scratch."

Approaching the exit, we heard again the sound of raging wind and once an earth shock nearly threw us off balance, but well-disciplined Holon guards maintained that remorseless march. "This place is surely going to break apart soon," muttered Hartnell.

Instead of plunging into the storm when we emerged from the shaft, our party swung unexpectedly left. Preparing for a sudden crouch in order to avoid that arm-wrenching jerk when the top-heavy tortoise-men collapsed to save themselves being blown over, I felt vaguely disappointed. Then, dragged to an abrupt halt, we stood motionless while more huge doors, like those guarding the Hall of Curiosities, opened with ponderous grinding.

I counted thirty further steps before being lifted bodily and pressed upon a hard, flat surface which inclined backwards at an angle of about twenty degrees from upright. Thin, light, intensely tough fastenings placed about my waist and ankles held me immobile without interfering with the use of my arms. I heard them securing Hartnell, Tubby and, lastly, Aiku. Afterwards they departed and we listened, rather despondently, to doors closing. In the instant that the rumbling died away there sounded a pronounced click—such as we had noticed in the horrifying museum—like a lock being turned upon us.

"Well," said Hartnell, "here we are—whatever it may be."

"Call Aiku, Pop," suggested Tubby. "See what he knows. I can't get the hang of these fastenings at all. They don't seem joined to anything. I daren't pull on 'em hard in case I cut my glove."

The news coming over the Mattus, while nothing more or less than expected, somehow provided a shock.

"We rest against the light-machine's receiver screen," said Aiku, his thoughts arriving only faintly because he was some

distance away. "Here the material gradually assembles when time comes for the apparatus to work again—the moment you call 'dawn.' It will cover us as with another shell and preserve us in death to be placed with those dreadful creatures underground."

Beyond this I failed to perceive a very clear picture, the reason most likely being that Aiku himself could not understand the light-machine's interior lay-out.

During our moments of confusion when Thung arrived at the Hall of Curiosities expecting to find us in various stages of madness, I had pushed Hartnell's torch into my pocket. "Tell me whereabouts you are, Aiku," I said. "I intend to switch on the death-lamp to observe something of our surroundings."

Mental impressions of position came across with surprising exactitude, but at the same time he said, "Even now, O Men of Earth, I beseech you not to kill the guards. They merely carry out their duties."

"Guards?"

"Oh, yes. Two Holon sentries sit twenty yards to the right, near the doors. Thung has made sure we do not escape through the lens-shaft."

First I shone the torch vertically overhead. Apart from the dull, pinkish beam nothing was visible. Gradually I lowered it until, at a point about thirty degrees from horizontal, the illumination struck the sides of some enormous, cone-like tube and burst into startling, dazzling white brilliance which made us all gasp. Double filters snapped down automatically in our visors, but all the same, after those long hours in pitch blackness, unaccustomed radiance made our eyes so painful that a further screen was necessary for comfort.

All three of us gasped simultaneously with surprise.

"What in the name of Cassiopea did that?" demanded Hartnell.

There was one explanation—for the first time since we reached Kor the torch had shone on some substance other than light-material. As an experiment, I turned the torch upon our peculiar fetters and here, too, the white brilliance was reflected.

"Of course," said Tubby, with inspiration. "We agreed the light-machine couldn't be made of its own metal, else it would have disappeared with the other stuff when the asteroid popped up previously. Nice to see a bit of good, straightforward illumination for a change, anyway."

The huge cone, we decided, formed the lens-shaft Aiku had mentioned. Outside must be a vast, circular bowl to gather in light-rays for focussing upon the screen where we were secured. Directed straight along this shaft, the torch beam appeared faint and pinkish; where it struck the sides that natural radiance flared. So much did we enjoy the spectacle that I flicked the lamp again and again, causing the visor-filters to jump wildly.

Tiring of this childish play, I switched off—and before our eyes at the end of the shaft five stars appeared momentarily. Three were pale specks; two twinkled boldly. Then they were gone, screened by drifting clouds.

In that instant Aiku screamed over the Mattus—a howl torn from his being by unendurable agony. Infinitesimal particles of light-substance, condensed by the machine from yellow-and-blue elements in the starlight, had driven deep into his sight organs.

"Are you injured?" I asked, anxiously. "I understand what has happened. Can you still see?"

"No lasting harm has been done. The pain was too brief for that. I am ashamed that in my weakness I cried out. But you, Men of Earth, did you not suffer also?"

"Our ending will be slower," I told him, grimly.

Indeed it must. We might reasonably expect the suits to protect us throughout the entire ordeal, taking upon their

material the gradually-gathering light-particles until sufficient accumulated to form an impervious envelope. Then, when our 100-hour oxygen supplies were exhausted, we should perish miserably of long-drawn-out asphyxiation inside an artificial shell.

"Am I seeing things," demanded Hartnell, suddenly, "or is it really growing lighter?"

"Can't be!" I said, briefly.

"It's not far off dawn!"

"Poor old Aiku would have felt something, wouldn't he?"

Outside the hurricane still raged, now and again puffing a blast of air down the lens-shaft so strongly that we could feel it through the atmosphere-suits.

"I tell you I did see light!" repeated Hartnell, excitedly. "And it wasn't dawn—not dawn on Krellig, anyway! It was white light!"

Then we realised what horror had come upon us in our helplessness. The red asteroid was appearing, casting its creeping rays upon the distant suburbs of Kor and dissolving the great buildings into immense columns of light.

CHAPTER TEN

THE RED TERROR

"LET'S think this out coolly and clearly," I suggested, "and see what possible chances we've got."

"Pretty grim, if you ask me," said Tubby. "Still, let's hear what's on your mind, Pop."

"These are the obstacles," I went on, affecting not to notice his pessimism. "One—the fastenings; two—the guards; three—the locked doors. Best idea, I think, is making the first and second cancel themselves out——"

"You mean bribing the Holons to undo these strap arrangements? How?"

"I don't know about bribes—but what about terror? These bloodthirsty types usually break when they find themselves in a tight corner. When some of those big skyscrapers start to crash even Holons won't have excuses for not hearing."

Flickers of light flashed uneasily across the lens-shaft, as though heralding a distant thunderstorm.

"Do you notice anything happening outside?" I asked Aiku.

"A long way off there is much panic—many people running and shouting with fright." Surprisingly, he didn't seem particularly alarmed himself. "Is this the end of Kor, about which you spoke, O Men of Earth?"

"Yes," I assured him, solemnly. "This is the end—and for ourselves, too, unless you persuade the guards to release us."

"That they cannot do. Thung has taken no chances. The Holons are locked in also."

"Tell them that if they remove the fetters we will break open the great doors."

He appeared rather doubtful about our ability to carry out this promise but was too polite to say so. While occupied in talking persuasively—I hoped—to the guards, his thoughts reaching me via the Mattus machine became blurred, although I followed the drift of his arguments.

"Well?" asked Hartnell. "How's it going?"

"Negotiations under way," I reported.

"Tell 'em to hurry, then!"

His words were underlined by the most violent earthquake shock we had so far experienced. I believe it speeded the Holons acquiescence, too, for Aiku was back shortly afterwards.

"They do not trust us. Liars themselves, they consider others are liars, also. They agree to release one person only until proof of your powers is demonstrated."

"Not good enough!" snapped Hartnell, upon learning the substance of our conversation.

"Yes it is!" I decided. "You're selected for the privilege, young Hartnell. From where he's tied up Aiku can see you easiest. I'll tell him to try to spot the secret of the fastenings. When you're free, punch a hole in the door with your torch and prism. That'll shake 'em!"

The words were hardly out of my mouth before I spotted with dismay a possible flaw that might wreck all our plans. Suppose the great doors were not constructed of light-metal? The cone containing the lens-shaft and the receiver-screen certainly were not—nor were the outer walls of the machine-housing, otherwise all would have disappeared in the previous,

ancient holocaust. One vague glimmer of hope consisted in the fact that the lining of this light-machine chamber absorbed yellow and blue elements from the beryllium torch beam in the same way as the buildings of Kor.

Three-way translation became necessary during the operations. Hartnell talked to me, I passed on the message to Aiku and he, in turn, told the Holons. Information travelled the other way in similar fashion.

I knew Hartnell was free by hearing his feet clump across the floor.

"Did you notice how the fastenings operated?" I asked Aiku.

"I think so, but I am not quite sure——"

Light flashes out beyond the lens-shaft grew brighter and more frequent, some of the really vivid discharges reflecting sufficiently into the interior of the light-machine for us to obtain first glances at our surroundings.

"Confound that asteroid!" muttered Hartnell. "If it only got busier a bit more quickly I'd be able to see the doors. You'll have to tell these Holons to lead me over there, Pop. I can't see a thing now."

"Are the doors light-metal?" I asked, anxiously. Scarce daring to breathe, I hung upon his answer.

"Seems like it, Pop. They feel the same, anyway."

"Be careful," I said. "Thanks to Thung taking my lamp, you're only two torches' length away this time."

All went well, apparently, for in a little time he called, "Ready! You and Tubby turn your faces away! Better tell Aiku to warn the Holons, as well. This white light discharge must have a red element in it—otherwise it wouldn't be white! I wouldn't mind if both guards were killed—but if only one passes out the other might become a bit peeved."

As further protection, breathing incantations of gratitude for still having arms free, Tubby threw another strip of his uniform across to Aiku as a blindfold.

To prove there was, in the time-honoured phrase, no deception, Hartnell insisted upon the guards themselves indicating where they wished the hole to be punched.

"Do you know, Pop," he called, excitedly, "these doors don't fit properly! Maybe the quakes have shifted the foundations a bit!"

"Never mind that now," I said. "Knock a piece out of 'em to please the Holons or they'll be getting impatient—and that means they might start work with their choppers."

"Have Aiku tell 'em to stand back a bit, then. Here she goes!"

I turned away and snapped down the entire battery of filter screens. A brief, sweat-laden pause seemed an hour.

Then we felt it again—an almost tangible, thudding discharge that printed whirling, multi-coloured stars on the retina behind closed eyelids and which I could have sworn pressed the suit more closely against my back.

"All over, in case you didn't know," said Hartnell. "Now tell 'em they can take their heads out of the sand and examine the proof!"

Soundless conversation between Holons and Shakkie ensued, after which I secured a mental picture of obviously over-awed guards pressing unbelieving tentacles against the small puncture at a spot where they themselves knew quite well no aperture existed before.

"Go on, Aiku," I urged. "Make them release the lot of us! Be masterful! Force them to obey——"

"I do not believe there will be further difficulty," he answered. "More people are thronging the streets outside." He paused, incredulous. "They cry that they are dying! Why should they die? I can hear their voices. The guards hear them, too! Terror is abroad throughout Kor, for now they realise that the city and all who dwell therein are doomed!"

A violent slash of reflected light showed a spectacle which nearly made my heart stop beating. Over me loomed a Holon carapace, perched upon its stalk, holding aloft in one tentacle a keen, black blade. "Something's gone wrong!" I thought, desperately, bringing automatically through the Mattus rod an alarmed inquiry from Aiku.

"Have no fear! The guard is releasing you!"

With inexpressible relief I felt the thin, strong fetters fall from waist and legs. Numbed and cramped, I staggered towards the doors. Flickers from the lens-shaft were almost continuous now and I could see Hartnell hurriedly probing a gap between the two great slabs of light-metal which enclosed us.

"A locking bar, Pop," he cried. "Look, you can see where it fixes into the mortice!"

"Very narrow, too. Three or four flashes from the prism ought to cut it through."

Quickly we issued necessary warnings. Aiku, waving his strip of cloth, begged us to give similar protection to the guards, who had apparently suffered somewhat from the previous discharge. Inside the atmosphere suits our natty Inter-X uniforms began to appear worse for wear—if not actually for wear.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Three times the prism's red light-band prised itself with tremendous force into the lock.

And twice again. Thud! Thud!

"It's through!" yelled Hartnell, when showering meteors of every hue began to fade from his tortured optic nerves. "Come on, everybody!"

Clusters of Holon tentacles on one side of the gap, six human hands on the other—and the huge doors rumbled smoothly apart.

Next instant the guards were gone. I caught a brief glimpse of two ellipsoid carapaces reeling and skipping before the winds that swept a courtyard expanse beyond the entrance.

"Well," I said, "we've carried out our part of the bargain, but I'm afraid they won't get far."

"Oh?" asked Hartnell.

Glow from the sky showed two strips of our uniforms abandoned upon the floor. "They've left their protection behind."

"Well," said Tubby, briskly, "how about getting out of here? Aiku can guide us and we'll drop him at his cave on the way to the ship. He'll be safe underground."

He made the procedure sound childishly simple. On the other hand, immeasurable streets—possibly in process of disintegration—lay between ourselves and the outer walls of Kor. Moreover, any Holons we met who were not entirely concerned with saving their own shells might prove awkward customers. Mob emotions run upon similar pattern among astoundingly-varied sorts of creatures, and the results are not pretty. Besides, with our eyes rendered uncomfortable by discharges from a mere cubic centimetre of dissolving light-material what might be the effects when Kor's monstrous buildings flashed into nothingness?

Something of the same doubts may have entered Tubby's mind, for he asked, "Why is it our prism breaks up the stuff instantaneously and yet this asteroid doesn't?"

"Yes," I said. "You're the expert in this line, young Hartnell. Why doesn't it?"

He paused a moment in thought. "I suppose it's more concentrated for one thing. Don't forget, either, that the torch emits white light and we get the 'wedge' effect, using the yellow and blue as well as the red. On the other hand, the asteroid gives out only red light and the rays have to travel quite a distance. The effect must be the same as pouring a spot of strong acid on damp material—fierce reaction and a lot of spluttering. Dilute acid will eat the stuff away just the same but takes longer and there aren't so many fireworks."

The light-machine building swayed violently as Krellig became racked by yet another paroxysm.

"Come on," I said. "Aiku's not the only one impatient to get out of here!"

When we emerged, the western sky was aflame with coruscating white glare, behind which the red asteroid hid itself from our gaze. So far as we could bear to look with half-closed eyes in that direction the towering edifices of Kor glowed in brilliant outline. Nearer at hand, buildings bore a bright, hazy aura, while over to the east many-storied structures still reared themselves like square black pencils against that unnatural firmament. Like an evil disease, the rays of that visitor from outer space crept slowly across the face of Krellig, dissolving all light-metal on which they fell.

"Great Gemini!" exclaimed Hartnell. "What a spectacle! Your cameras getting all this, Tubby?"

"Doing what I can!" replied our photographer, briefly. "Aperture's down to a pinhole—but even so I don't know whether the filter's dense enough." He gave an expression of disgust. "Either I'm photographing stuff in the dark—or else things go to the other extreme and there's too much light!"

"Never mind," I said, comfortingly. "The ship's cameras will be working, anyway. They're hardly able to miss this. We ought to meet a rescue team soon."

"Fat lot of good that would be if we hadn't managed to escape of our own accord," said Hartnell. "And I hope you'll say so on the controller's report."

"Well, let's get moving!"

Hartnell went first. Aiku, blindfolded and guiding us by mental pictures, rested one tentacle upon his shoulder and with another grasped the Mattus rod as I walked closely behind him. Tubby brought up the rear, still taking photographs. With his infra-red record of those horrible, unknown things in the Hall of Curiosities and now visible-light shots of Kor's

dissolution he ought to send the headquarters boys running round with little squeals of delight and also earn himself a useful bonus.

Fortunately, most of the terrified mobs had vanished, presumably fleeing before the encroaching terror. Now and again little groups of Holons crawled past. On the first few occasions we shrank into convenient corners between the black buildings, but they took no notice. In any case, I doubt if they could have chased us through the still-blowing storm and after a time I knew that all of them were blind, crazy and already dying.

Indeed, we ourselves felt more than a little light-headed. The full monstrosity of Kor's construction was borne upon us now that we could see—rows of square, black boxes, windowless and without ornamentation, piled one upon another in gradually descending sizes and resting upon the bare, uneven rock.

Then, far away at the end of the unbelievable street, filling its full width at ground level, I noticed a strange, moving glow. Swiftly it rushed towards us, lapping in waves against the buildings and leaving shining stains where it touched.

A stray Holon, perched at full height on his stalk of tentacles, formed a bizarre island for a split-second as the brightness swirled around him. Immediately he collapsed, motionless.

"Quick!" I screamed. "Get ready to carry Aiku!"

My rush of thought-impulses nearly fused the Mattus. Simultaneously the three of us took the Shakkie's weight—and not an instant too soon, for the sparkling flood washed weightlessly round our ankles as he drew his last tentacle clear. Then, like a globule of effervescent quicksilver, the mysterious brilliance had gone. We were unharmed, but the stuff was obviously sheer poison to tortoise-men.

"What in Capricorn was that?" gasped Tubby. "It looked almost like a river of light."

"I believe that's precisely what it was," said Hartnell. "Besides dissipating into the atmosphere, the light-material's actually melting in places where radiation from the asteroid isn't at full strength."

"And another thing—look at the walls, where the stream touched them. It's eating 'em away."

"I'll take your word for it, Pop. My eyes are watering too much to see."

"All those noisy tremors aren't quakes, either! They're buildings collapsing."

"Let's get away before one falls on us."

Three times more we staggered beneath Aiku's bulk as "liquid" waves rushed from unexpected directions. Ever-decreasing intervals marked their appearance. The asteroid's influence obviously travelled at a greater pace than we were capable of making.

And then, on the verge of exhaustion, we saw with leaping, thankful hearts, the great wall leading to the plain we had previously traversed as prisoners. Pale fire flickered along its entire length, spraying coruscating discharges across the gap beyond which we must pass. And here, for Aiku's sake, we had to pause and sacrifice almost the whole of our uniforms to provide a thorough covering before we dared take him through at an uneven run.

Glare from stricken Kor lit our path across the plain, brilliantly illuminating the foothills where Shakkie caves were situated. Free from the light-metal's baleful influence, I found the distress-signal to be transmitting clearly again and as white mist faded slowly in my eyes I saw familiar outlines of a "land-roller" from the ship. Even as we looked, the vehicle picked up our signal and altered course.

The rescuers who helped us aboard divided their attention three ways—regarding with something like respect the men who had emerged safely from the "holocaust"; studying Aiku's strange form with fascinated interest; and at the same time sparing more than passing glances for the dissolution of

Kor, where columns of light blasted to immense heights from the giant buildings, some of which we saw falling like great black logs into an open furnace.

Aiku, almost weeping with gratitude, was escorted to safe depths of his tribe's tunnels, where he and a group of his fellows bade us farewell in complete darkness. We dared not switch on torches for fear of injuring the Shakkies..

"We will remember, O Men of Earth," said Aiku, solemnly. "Knowledge handed down to us since the days of the Old Ones has remained safely preserved in our minds through uncounted centuries. In the same way, the service you have rendered to my people will be eternally treasured. From what I have seen, the Holons will be too few in number to trouble us more. Not many will save their lives by reaching the food-tunnels."

"Remain here," I told him, "until——" I paused. How does one describe a period of time to creatures who possess no method of measurement? Best means I could improvise was walking along the tunnel until I came to the spot where we had seen the first clump of fungus growing. From where we had scraped our specimen off the wall a further crop already sprouted—thin, white tubes about a quarter-of-an-inch long. Making a quick calculation, I took a piece of the torn uniform from Aiku's grasp and went on "——Until the fungus has grown equal to this length. Then it will be safe for your people to emerge again and use the Old Ones' light-machine to build a worthy city."

After a few more dignified but emotional farewells, we departed, quickly reaching our ship in the "land-roller" and receiving an hilarious welcome. I was never more thankful to crawl out of an atmosphere-suit and take a much-needed bath.

Decision had been issued "at a higher level" that no further purpose would be served by a general-purpose expedition remaining on so primitive a planet, although a specialised crew of physico-engineers and zoologists might call later to

study the light-machine and the Old Ones' horrible museum specimens. So after dumping several crates of instruments and tools suitable for the Shakkies' use—complete with easily understandable instruction diagrams—"Old Growler" took off for the long run back to base.

Viewed from lower-deck screens, Kor now blazed from end to end, presenting a terrific spectacle. Every member of the crew not needed for actual flying duty crowded round while we picked out, so far as we were able against the glare, principal streets and buildings.

One dull spot in the flaming mass—like a sunspot, dark against incandescent surroundings—showed where the light-machine stood. And even as we watched, a black, zigzag line snaked suddenly across the scene.

"What——?" began Hartnell.

"Earthquake fissure," I said, quietly.

"Oh!"

We knew instinctively what must have happened. Next second no dark spot was visible and the irregular marking disappeared beneath the incredible brilliance.

I drew a deep, deep breath. "Well, that's that."

"Pity about the light-machine," said Hartnell. "But I can't say I'm sorry over the other thing."

"And old Aiku will be left in peace," said Tubby. "They won't bother to send another expedition now."

For half-an-hour we gazed at Krellig's swiftly-receding globe and its uncanny satellite, clearly visible overhead. Then Hartnell turned away and said, apropos of nothing in particular, "It'll be Christmas before we land again. Any idea what they're doing this time for a celebration aboard? I expect Grubersohn's rehearsing that awful song of his—the only one he knows. Isn't there any way of short-circuiting him? You've both seen him plenty of times before—all dressed up in that fancy costume, thinking himself the life and soul of the party, throwing his head back and howling

like a squeal-demon from Hegga. Trouble is, he really and truly believes he's got a good singing voice."

"Never mind," I said, comfortingly. "All through the centuries Christmas has been a time of goodwill and I suppose we ought to try to live up to it. I suppose we're lucky, for that matter, to see any celebrations at all."

"Too true!" said Tubby, with feeling. "For instance, when we were locked up with those ghastly things in the underground museum——"

"That reminds me, Pop," said Hartnell, curiously. "Remember how Thung came along to see if we'd gone mad? How did you convince him through the Mattus machine that we had?"

I looked once more at Kor, still bathed in the dreadful light of its own destruction. "I kept my mind a blank," I said, "except for one thing. I concentrated on a vivid mental picture, with sound effects, of old Grubersohn—singing his party piece!"

They stared blankly for a moment, then dissolved into helpless laughter.

"If that didn't convince Thung we were crazy," said young Hartnell, tears streaming down his cheeks, "nothing would!"

THE END

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